

ON THE CONCEPT OF SIN IN THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION AND
JOSIAH ROYCE'S *THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIANITY*:
TOWARDS A THEO-PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This essay proposes that theology and philosophy are not mutually exclusive or at odds with one another methodologically, but in fact that religious categories are useful in philosophical analyses, and particularly when it comes to ethics. In this essay, I examine the theological concept of sin as it is expressed in Latin American Liberation Theology (over and against the more traditional understanding of sin in Western Christianity) as the domination of the Other and the oppression of the poor through geo-political systems of power. I explore the responses to this notion from the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as my own critiques in terms of theoretical integrity with particular regard to claims of universalism. The essay then proceeds into a synthesis of these criticisms through the work of Josiah Royce on Community and Loyalty in *The Problem of Christianity*.

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Pro Christo et Regno Ejus

“For Christ and his Kingdom” –Motto of Pacific University

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: A THEO-PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

A. On the Border between Theology and Philosophy

Interdisciplinary analysis has become the watchword of the postmodern age: yet at the same time to work on the border between philosophy and theology has gradually fallen into disrepute in modern times. One reason for this could be that theology is considered a closed system, a self-referential discourse of justification for superstition and abstract theorization. On the other hand, philosophy has indulged itself more and more in claims of being “scientific,” which has caused the fields of metaphysics and transcendental ethics to be devalued. And while the divorce of philosophy and theology may not in reality be as complete as it seems to be in the world of Academia, it is certainly the case that the closeness the two schools of thought once enjoyed is no longer so prominent a feature of intellectual discourse. Yet it was not too long ago that judicious analyses of religious phenomena and theoretical questions were undertaken by many philosophers. Josiah Royce, at the outset of his book *The Problem of Christianity*, describes the interests of the religiously minded scholar in the following manner:

The modern student of the problems of religion in general, or of Christianity in particular, may see good reason for agreeing with the apologists...in attributing to Christianity, viewed simply as a product of human evolution, a central importance in history, in the religious experience of our race, and in the endlessly renewed,

yet very ancient, endeavor of mankind to bring to pass, or to move towards, the salvation of man.¹

What students of both philosophy and religion truly seek is the truth of what is best for human beings: how best to live, how best to know, how best to act. Yet the diminution of the transcendent (the metaphysically ‘real’) that came about through Modernity and its subsequent responses also had the effect of calling into question the possibility of ethical maxims that could transcend the particular. With the development of anthropology and the subsequent parsing of culture and language along geo-political lines (particularly through the pseudo-scientific racism of the 19th and early 20th century), the ‘humankind’ of Modernity came to be broken into ever smaller groups of “humans,” making the establishment of an overarching praxis all the more impossible. It is as a response to this particularity and relativism that the orientation towards religious questions and systems of belief becomes pertinent, proposing to investigate ideas that are ordered towards the unity of humanity in experience and existence in and through the purview of the Divine.

When it comes to these kinds of ethical questions, religious systems have often been viewed with skepticism as overly exclusive, with set categories and closed systems of justification: yet juxtaposed to the exclusion of the absolute through cultural relativism, and with a critical and historical appreciation for pluralistic interpretation, religious ethics, and Christian ethics in particular, can be seen as fruitful sources for the analysis of human agency. The present essay proceeds with this potentiality in mind.

¹ Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, foreword by Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J., 5th ed. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2001), 60.

B. Sin as an Ethical Concept

Drawing the kind of sharp distinction that many philosophers prefer to use to separate the discourses of ethical and religious activity renders any discussion of sin entirely incoherent, precisely because the concept of sin is proper to both ethical behavior and religious experience. Identifying an action as a sin evokes all of the negative meaning of ethical terms like “crime” or “violation,” yet ‘sin’ also connotes a hidden lair of meaning that goes beyond the merely practical effects of ethics to the ontological level of human agents. As Josef Pieper writes in *The Concept of Sin*,

Sin is an inner contortion whose essence is misconstrued if we interpret it as sickness or, to descend into an even more trivializing level, merely as an infraction against conventional rules of behavior...On the contrary, sin in its reality *means* a failure that has been committed before a superhuman judging power who longs for reconciliation.²

According to Pieper, though the term itself is utterly out of vogue in most discourses on ethics, sin nonetheless continues to be an important way of conceiving of ethical violations because it denotes the causes and effects of human praxis at the highest of level of being (the judgment of God) and the most fundamental level of the self (the ‘soul’).

I share Pieper’s enthusiasm for this category of analysis, yet also recognize the reasons for its disuse. Too often sin has been thought of as the justification for some punishment exacted in a posthumous, otherworldly utopia; it has been associated with the deterministic ontology of creationism; or it is only seen in terms of the sacerdotal practices of the Christian Church. On the other hand, I see the category of sin as

² Josef Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 7.

descriptive of the dynamic experience of human life and the ethical encounters between people at odds with one another. I take this to be a pragmatist perspective that orients itself towards the lived experience of this notion, yet that does not abandon the idealistic theoretical transcendence and absolutely utopian character that this religious category entails. What I see in sin that is of value is a universal, total impetus towards ethical behavior that responds to and even ameliorates the crimes of this world through the creation of a better one here and now.

Beyond Pieper and the traditional definition of sin in Western Christianity, I propose in this essay to explore how the category of sin is defined by Latin American thinkers of the Theology of Liberation, particularly Enrique Dussel, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Franz Hinkelammert. The definition of sin given in this system of thought avoids the ontological pitfall of overemphasizing the self that characterizes the more mainstream definition. Instead, in Liberation Theology the notion of sin is put in terms of human praxis, human to human relations, and the process of liberation. The definition is not wholly without theoretical weaknesses, though: some of its most vociferous critics are high ranking members of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. In the second section of the essay I will outline the critiques voiced by Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), as well as my own view of the shortcomings of the definition of sin given in Liberation Theology. In the final section of the essay, I will show how the philosophical analysis of communitarian ethics and the understanding of sin as the betrayal of the Beloved Community given by Josiah Royce responds to and incorporates both my own critiques of some of the ideological biases of Liberation Theology and the criticisms voiced by the Magisterium. By providing this thoroughgoing

analysis of what sin can and should mean in theory and in praxis, I hope to achieve the kind of intersectional analysis that overcomes the relativism of modernity and the incipient division of philosophy from theology.

CHAPTER II

SIN AND RECONCILIATION IN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

In order to begin to define the notions of sin and reconciliation at work in Theology of Liberation, it is worthwhile to consider how they are situated in relation to traditional understandings of sin in the broader context of Western Roman Catholicism, since Liberation Theology came out of and in response to this tradition. This section, therefore, will proceed from an exposition of the more traditional definition of sin (which derives primarily from the works of Thomas Aquinas) to an explication of sin in Liberation Theology put in terms of its consonances and discordances with this tradition.

A. Traditional Definitions of Sin

1. The Ontological Basis for Sin

It is difficult to define sin in the Western Christian tradition as an ethico-religious category of human activity without some grasp of the metaphysical framework underlying it. There is in this tradition a prevailing sense of order, regulation, and determination established and governed by God that applies to all things from stars and rocks to lilies and bears. This divinely planned, meticulously arranged tableau of the universe is set in motion by agency, the power to act and effect change, guided by the intentionality of divine and human agents. God alone stands independent of the rigor by which Nature is given shape, free to will and act with absolute impunity. Creatures existing within the universe, on the other hand, are thrust into being already ensnared within the limits God has imposed upon them through the very way in which they were

created. Pieper explains that “Man’s ‘nature’ can virtually be identified with his creaturely status: his being a creature—his coming into the world without his consent—defines his innermost essence.”³ Christian anthropology understands human beings to be a special kind of creature endowed with similar capacities to God’s, such as self-awareness and free willing. Yet while God remains uncreated and absolutely free, the freedom of human beings is bound by the constraints imposed upon them by their situation in Nature. As Pieper states it, “our reality as creatures” presents us “with the standard, the boundary, the norm for our decisions, decisions which are *not* drawn ‘from nothing,’ but are decisions *of* the creature, *as* a creature.”⁴ Morality, then, consists in judgments of human agency against the standard of creation, and its categories (including sin) are not separated “from that same pre-given ontic condition.”⁵

Thomas Aquinas’ definition of sin follows directly from this conclusion: “To sin is nothing else but to hang back from the good that belongs to one by nature...Everything that fights against the inclination of nature is sin.”⁶ In Aquinas’ view, every human person is an intentional creation of God: the purpose behind that creation (its final cause) comes to inhere then in the creature.⁷ Pieper describes the “inclination of nature” as the “hidden gravitational pull that is active in each individual regulation of the will. It is the fundamental energy by virtue of which human existence presses toward its intended

³ Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 36.

⁴ *Ibid*, 40-1.

⁵ *Ibid*, 37.

⁶ Aquinas, from *Summa Theologicae*, qtd. in Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 37, 38.

⁷ Just as a wheel is crafted with the intention that it roll, and its craftsmanship can be judged based upon how well it rolls, so too are humans (as works of God) made with a final cause against which one can measure functional efficiency or deficiency. The difference between the wheel and people, however, is that human beings are crafted with the capacity to act to promote or inhibit their functionality independently (that is, their status as creature is not static but open to change).

goal.”⁸ The *inclinatio naturae* (“inclination of nature”) can be construed as the final cause of a human’s existence: it is the orientation towards a goal that ultimately defines what or who one is. Sin can therefore be understood most simply as any assertion of agency that impedes this natural tendency towards God’s ends in a person.

The human capacity for self-improvement or self-corruption is as much an abiding and determinative fact of the universe as the laws of physics. Unlike the motion of objects in space, however, human agency is inherently unpredictable: the determinative quality of human agency is precisely its indeterminacy. The juxtaposition of this reality against the notion that human beings are constrained by their natural inclination towards the final cause their creator endowed them with brings into sharp relief the danger of sin and why it can function effectively as a category of moral judgment. “Being ordered to a goal happens by doing; sin consists in this, it disturbs the ordering toward the goal, essentially in a doing.”⁹ According to Aquinas, the *telos* (end or goal) that orients human existence is not only a part of their essential nature, but is the defining feature of it, such that the effect of sinning (acting in a way that impedes progress to the goal) is a distortion of the very essence of one’s existence.¹⁰

2. Sin as Missing the Mark

The existential effects of sinning upon the individual warrant its consideration as an ethical category in the sense that ethics involves the judgment of any assertion of

⁸ Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 37.

⁹ Aquinas, from *Summa Theologicae*, qtd. in Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 30.

¹⁰ In his discussion of this point, Pieper describes sin as a distortion of what Heidegger calls *Dasein*, the ground of human existence. See Pieper, 31.

agency that has consequences in the world as good or bad. In the Western tradition of ethics in general, it is fair to say that one major question in the consideration of human action is whether or not the individual is accountable for the effects of the act. This is certainly true of sin: according to Aquinas, “In the full sense of the word that act is moral that stands entirely and completely in our power.”¹¹ Pieper explains that “it also belongs to the concept of moral failure, and thus of sin itself, that one must be responsible and accountable for it.”¹² It is interesting to note that even a cursory linguistic analysis of the origins of the term “sin” reveals that the issue of culpability through intention is a distinctively religious addition. The Hebrew noun חַטָּאת (*chatta't*) and the Greek ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*), the words used in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible that are translated into the Latin *peccatum*, the Spanish *pecado*, and finally the English word “sin,” derive from verbal forms that in their earliest iterations can be translated as “to miss the mark.”¹³ In the context of Homer’s *Iliad*, for instance, ἁμαρτάνειν refers to a warrior throwing his spear at a foe and missing him.¹⁴ The deficiency in this act is one based upon the intention of the warrior: he aims to throw the spear into his enemy, yet fails to strike his intended target. Aquinas differentiates this kind of sin, which he calls a *peccatum in actu artis* (a “technical sin”) from *peccatum in moralibus* (a “moral sin”) in two ways: first, the goal that is not achieved in a technical sin is always particular, meaning that the failure is discrete and does not violate the ultimate *telos* of one’s life; and second, the goal that is violated in a technical failure always comes from a distinctly

¹¹ Aquinas, from *De Veritate*, qtd. in Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 31.

¹² Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 31.

¹³ See “ἁμαρτάνω” in Liddell and Scott, “חַטָּאת” in Brown, Driver, and Briggs (2398).

¹⁴ See *Iliad*, Book 5, Line 287.

human intention, as opposed to that which comes about through the *inclination naturae* (which is identified with God's intention).¹⁵ In a similar analogy, one could say that a marksman failing to hit a target of his own choosing is committing a technical sin because he has merely failed to achieve his own arbitrary goal, and he has only fallen short in terms of the techniques and rules of marksmanship, not his basic humanity.

The fundamental difference for Aquinas between a technical failure and a truly moral sin (one which a person can stand guilty of) relates back to the notion of human existence being ordered towards a divine *telos*. More specifically, Aquinas' proclivity for prizing the ends of human action, and thus the intentions by which they are first undertaken, is the foundation for him for how to judge sinful actions. Pieper explains this by expanding on the example of the marksman:

The shot that killed Martin Luther King was no doubt, when considered from a purely technical point of view, a brilliantly executed "direct hit." But the first-class marksman was also, and by that very fact, a murderer. A surgical intervention might well be both a criminal abortion and an extraordinarily well done, "successful" operation. *Artifex non culpatur* ["the artist is not guilty"]. The marksman and surgeon, insofar as they have mastered and now possess the techniques of their trade, are rather to be praised than accused. Yet as assassin or abortionist—that is, when we consider both men as moral persons, or as Thomas

¹⁵ See Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 22-3. Aristotle makes a similar distinction when he employs the term *αμαρτάνω* in Book III of *The Nichomachean Ethics*, which deals especially with the relation of justice to choice, foreknowledge and intention. See especially 1135b.

says, *inquantum sunt homines* [“insofar as they are human”]—their failings [*Fehlleistungen*] are glaring.¹⁶

What makes an act sinful, therefore, is its nature as what Pieper calls “an infringement against a transhuman, absolute norm” that orients the entirety of one’s existence. In this tradition of thought, sin does not reduce to simply falling short of the arbitrary standards of human *techne* (technical arts), but the failure to abide by teleological norms that both transcend and constrain the individual in virtue of his or her presence in the created world.

The idea of חטאת (*chatta ’t*), as described by Jacob Milgrom in his commentary on the book of Leviticus, has much in common with Aquinas’ understanding of sin as the violation of divinely ordered norms. Yet Milgrom argues that חטאת has been misconstrued over time because of its translation into Greek as *ἁμαρτία* as pertaining to the kind of transhuman violations that Aquinas has in mind. Milgrom argues that “The very range of the *chatta ’t* in the cult gainsays the notion of sin. For example, this offering [to expiate the *chatta ’t*] is enjoined upon recovery from childbirth (chap. 12), the completion of the Nazirite vow (Num. 6), and the dedication of the newly constructed altar (8:15; see Exod 29:36-7). In other words, the *chatta ’t* is prescribed for persons and objects who cannot have sinned.”¹⁷ Milgrom states that the meaning of *chatta ’t* does not have to do with any crime against another person, nor does it have to do with any intentional sin: rather, it has to do with the unintentional, inadvertent defilement of the sacred by those who are “physically impure.” Milgrom concludes that “the object of the

¹⁶ Ibid, 28. *Fehlleistung* is the word Pieper uses throughout this chapter as the translation of *ἁμαρτία* in its non-religious meaning.

¹⁷ Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 253.

chatta't purification...[is] the sanctuary and its sancta. By daubing the alter with the *chatta't* blood or by bringing it inside the sanctuary...the priest purges the most sacred objects and areas of the sanctuary on behalf of the person who caused their contamination by his physical impurity or inadvertent offense.”¹⁸ What this shows is that *chatta't* refers to a violation against the impersonal sacred that Milgrom cannot bring himself to call a sin, yet that nonetheless fits within the sense of a violation of a “transhuman, absolute norm.” Moreover, it is remarkable that this kind of unintentional violation nonetheless requires reconciliation or atonement through ritual purification. In this way, the idea of *chatta't* contains elements of both the technical and moral definitions of *peccatum* that Aquinas gives, providing a novel middle ground between the purely non-religious Greek sense of *ἁμαρτία* and Aquinas’ theo-ethical *peccatum in moralibus*.

3. The Causes and Effects of Sin

In Aquinas’ view, all sin is “*inordinatio quae excludit ordinem finis ultimi* [disorder that excludes the order of the ultimate end (*telos*)].”¹⁹ Sins are violations of the teleological principles that order the universe, and their consequences are seen in the warping of the sinner’s very soul. The realization that such a violation is even possible is a result of the nature of the human situation: simultaneously free to will and yet bound to a *telos* not of our choosing. As Pieper puts it, “We never can sin with the unreserved power of our will, never without an inner reservation, never with one’s whole heart...because sin always takes place by going against the natural [*naturhaften*] impulse

¹⁸ Ibid, 256.

¹⁹ Aquinas, from *De Malo*, qtd. in Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 49.

of the sinner himself.”²⁰ When one commits a sin, it is never total, because insofar as one is a member of the created world (which on this account we all are), one is always beholden to the ends dictated by that status as creature. Rather, as Aquinas puts it, “Evil is never striven for in the manner of turning toward something, but only by turning away from something. Thus one says something is ‘good’ by virtue of its participation in the good, but something is ‘evil’ only by virtue of its distance from the good.”²¹ Because human agency is as much a product of divine craftsmanship as the body and mind, it likewise comes pre-programmed towards a specific *telos*: the good. Thus any assertion of agency in the direction of evil constitutes a turning away from its essential tendency towards the divine order: “*Fit iniuria ipsi Deo, ordinatori naturae.*”²²

Sin, then, has consequences as a violation of nature (the warping of the self as it wars with its nature as creature), and as an injury against God (construed both as the impersonal order of the universe and as the person who creates that order). Beyond this, Aquinas also describes sin as *actus contra rationem*, an act “contrary to reason.” Pieper explains that “sin goes contrary to reason by a deliberate act committed with full and clear understanding of what one is doing and with full responsibility (which is precisely what makes sin, as people say, that much ‘crazier!’”²³ Sin cannot even be recognized as such without reason: “reason is the window or mirror through which and in which the objective Logos of things becomes manifest to us...Reason is not some neutral or passive medium; it is the living power that opens up for us the reality of the world and of

²⁰ Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 38.

²¹ Aquinas, from *Summa Theologicae*, qtd. in Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 59.

²² Aquinas, from *De Malo*, qtd. in Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 49. “He injures God Himself, the Designer of Nature.”

²³ Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 42.

existence.”²⁴ The anthropology given here not only presupposes an independent will and a divinely motivated spirit, but also a faculty of reason that can unequivocally shed light upon the world. The capacity for true and real knowledge is of vital importance to the notion of sin, according to Pieper, because “sin cannot be an inadvertent mistake [*Versehen*: an overlooking of something]. Unwilled lapse is never sin.”²⁵ This point returns to the distinction between a technical and moral lapse: only the moral lapse, which one can and should be held accountable for, involves the free and conscious adoption of a course that is against the rational order of the universe.²⁶

All sins, then, are violations of the order of the universe, and can be seen as *contra rationem* and *contra Deum*. The effects of these sins vary, however, based upon the severity of the sin: “venial” sins, according to Pieper, are sins that are “forgivable,”²⁷ and differ from the more severe “mortal” sins “in the same way the perfect form is distinguished from the imperfect.”²⁸ While venial sins do cause a disturbance in the moral order, it is not on the same level as that of mortal sins; the latter is distinguished by the thoroughgoing nature of the corruption of the soul it occasions. “*From within its own essence*, from its inherent power to stand fast by its guilt, a healing is not possible—just as we call a disease ‘mortal’ if it can no longer be overcome from within the resources of the sick person, since the very principle of life has been jeopardized and affected by the

²⁴ Ibid, 44.

²⁵ Ibid, 33.

²⁶ It ought to be noted that this is an explicit contradiction of the *chatta't* definition of sin given by Milgrom. There are any number of reasons for this difference of interpretation, the most obvious being their different origins (one in Thomist Christianity and the other in Judaism).

²⁷ Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 68.

²⁸ Aquinas, qtd. in *ibid*, 67.

fatal disease.”²⁹ On this account, the heinous nature of a sinful act is not what causes it to be regarded as a “mortal” sin, but rather it is the refusal to acknowledge blame or guilt, to persevere *contra rationem* in the face of the rational order and the Divine Adjudicator.

“Most crucially of all,” according to Pieper, sins (both mortal and venial) occasion “a still deeper ontological transformation, one that penetrates the very core of the person, branding the soul with a property which the ancients call...*reatus*.”³⁰ He goes on to explain, “Sin doesn’t just mean: I have *done* something. Sin also means: I henceforth *am* something that I was not previously: I am, because of my deed, guilty.”³¹ Herein lies the fundamental difference between a mere crime or ethical violation and sin: while the former is a violation of the norms of a given community, sin is understood to have an effect upon the very being of the individual. Sins cause warps and fractures precisely because they are violations of one’s very nature. Venial sins are less severe, bending but never breaking the self away from its inherent nature. Mortal sins, however, bring about irreparable harm, contorting one’s soul so violently that it can never be untwisted.³² While the action of a single sin is but a fleeting moment in life, each one is understood to have an effect upon the self as a whole, dragging it further and further from the goals and potentials that lead to full fulfillment and divine approbation.

It is worthwhile to emphasize that these corruptions of self are limited to the sinner and have no ultimate effect upon God, in spite of the fact of the sinner’s situation

²⁹ Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, 68.

³⁰ Ibid, 86. “*Reatus*” is defined as “the condition of an accused person,” or more broadly as “guilt”, and is related to the verb *reor*, “to judge, suppose, deem, or imagine” (Lewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary, Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary*, Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1879).

³¹ Ibid, 87.

³² That is, the ability of one to achieve one’s ultimate *telos*, the divinely ordained *telos* imposed through creation, is lastingly impeded, such that there is no longer any possibility of reaching that end.

in the natural order. In Aquinas' cosmology, God stands removed from creation to the extent that human actions cannot affect the Godhead. "Viewed in strict terms, the action of man can neither provide anything for God nor take anything away from God... God's intention cannot be frustrated [*non frustratur*], either in those who sin or in those who attain salvation."³³ God's agency as divine creator and divine adjudicator cannot be marred by the activity of human agents precisely because they exist in virtue of God's active intentionality. The corruption of the creature has no effect upon the creator, as the creator is constantly refashioning the creation to suit the rational order. Another way to look at this is to acknowledge that the intentionality of God is behind the sins of humanity. Aquinas asserts that "The cause of the removal of grace is not due only to the one who resists grace; it is also God who deigns not to bestow grace by virtue of his judging decree. Seen from this perspective, God is the cause of the blindness of the eye, the deafness of the ear, and the hardness of the heart."³⁴ In this sense, human beings seem to fall victim to a kind of entrapment, wherein God both sets up and convicts those guilty of sin seemingly without any agency on the part of the sinner. To go this far, however, is to forget the fundamental free agency of human beings, and to focus too much upon the ineffable will of God, drawing attention away from the question at hand (namely, what the practical consequences of sin really are).

4. Summary

In this traditional framework, born from the mind of St. Thomas Aquinas and ensconced in the Roman Church and the vast majority of Western Christians for most of

³³ Aquinas, qtd. in *ibid*, 54.

³⁴ Aquinas, qtd in *ibid*, 76.

the pre-modern and modern periods, sin is an act of a free human agent that violates, contradicts, or impedes the rational order of the universe. The divine *telos* that every creature of God is endowed with is understood to be the epitome of the Good: for as it states in Genesis 1:31, having created the whole universe and humankind, God sees that the creation is not just good, but “very good.” The perfection of the creation is the metaphysical frame into which the causes and effects of sin are set: the conscious violation of the rational order, the inhibition of the soul from its end, the corruption of self, and transcendent judgment of the Creator.

These defining characteristics of the traditional notion of sin, however, are precisely what lead to its dismissal by Enlightenment and Post-Modern philosophers. The view of the universe is seen as overly deterministic and seems plainly self-contradictory with the assertion of a divinely-oriented yet nonetheless free human will. The inward orientation of the effects of sin makes its practical value as a concept in ethics almost nil; ethics focuses on the effects of actions beyond the self, not within it. To craft moral and political policy without a standard of judgment that can be measured on the ground, within the context of a specific place and people, but that instead exists in a transcendent realm in which ‘it all comes out right in the end’ is to abandon the project of ethics to either fundamentalism or naïve utopianism.

What is wrong with this definition of sin, however, does not necessarily imply that the notion of sin is wholly outdated or unintelligible in the modern context. In the next section of the essay, I will present an explication of how the concept of sin came to be defined in the discourse of Latin American *teología de la liberación* [Theology of Liberation], the ways in which it appropriates some of the traditional Western Christian

notion of sin, but also the ways in which it improves upon this definition in providing a clearer standard for ethics and politics.

B. Defining Sin in the Language of Liberation Theology

1. Sin Is the Domination of the Other

The Theology of Liberation, broadly construed, encompasses a myriad of voices from across the Latin American world, yet no one figure is more closely identified with what Liberation theology is than Gustavo Gutierrez. In spite of the attempts to condemn or detract from the importance of his seminal work,³⁵ *Teología de la Liberación: Perspectivas* (1972) is at the heart of the theological and philosophical movement of reinvention in the *doxa* and praxis of the Catholic Church. It is in *Teología* that sin is first clearly and distinctively defined for the discourse of Liberation theology:

“Cristo nos ha liberado para que gocemos de libertad” (Galatians 5:1), nos dice Pablo. Liberación del pecado, en tanto que éste representa un repliegue egoísta sobre sí mismo. Pecar es, en efecto, *negarse a amar a los demás y, por consiguiente, al Señor mismo*. El pecado, *ruptura de amistad con Dios y con los otros*, es, para la Biblia, la causa última de la miseria, de la injusticia, de la opresión en que viven los hombres.³⁶

³⁵ In 1984, the bishops of Peru were called to Rome with the expressed purpose of condemning Gutierrez and his works. Despite pressure from the Vatican, the bishops refused to denounce their colleague, which did not help to lessen the animosity of Rome towards Gutierrez’s ideas. See Paul Hebblethwaite, “Liberation theology and the Roman Catholic Church” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 216-7.

³⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Teología de la Liberación: Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1972), 66, emphases added. “‘Christ has freed us so that we can rejoice in freedom’ (Galatians 5:1), Paul tells us. Liberation from sin, as Paul presents it here, is liberation from an egoistic folding in upon oneself. To sin is,

The activity of sinning is described by Gutierrez as not just a failure to love one's neighbor, to love the Other (*los demás, los otros*), but an active denial of the fellowship (*amistad*) and love (*amar*) that relates humans to one another and to God. Gutierrez couches his definition in biblical terms, noting that this specific definition of sin reflects the scriptural notion that it is *sin* that is the cause (material, formal, efficient and final) of injustice. Instead of beginning with the metaphysical conditions of rational order and free agency that Aquinas chooses as the basis for his doctrine of sin, Gutierrez chose to put his definition in purely ethical and relational terms; if there is any metaphysical principle at work here, it is that of *amistad*, which denotes the actuality of the relation of fellowship that binds up the agents at work in the world (God and humans). Conceiving the ordering of the world in terms of relations of fellowship and love affects the ways in which the metaphysical causes and effects of sin are understood: there is no doubt that free will plays a key role here as in Aquinas' system, yet on this account will is always bound to ethical relations first and foremost, and not some standard of pure reason.³⁷ The denial and 'warping' of the well-ordered creation we see in Aquinas thus explicitly becomes an 'injustice,' a 'betrayal' of the Other that generates conditions of misery and oppression; consequently, overlooking injustice for the sake of the "rational order" would in itself also be a betrayal and sin.

On the other hand, liberation from sin, the fundamental concern of Liberation Theology, is not just a negation of sin: Gutierrez, echoing the words of Lutheran

in effect, to refuse to love the Other, and consequently, to refuse to love the Lord himself. Sin, the rupture of fellowship with God and with others, is, according to the Bible, the ultimate cause of the misery, injustice, and oppression in which humanity lives."

³⁷ In this way, Gutierrez's definition reflects the pervasive influence of postmodern (or in Dussel's terminology, 'transmodern') thought in Liberation Theology.

theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, asserts that “Pablo no solo afirma que Cristo nos liberó, que nos dice que lo hizo para que fuésemos libres. ¿Libres para qué? Libres para amar...La plenitud de la liberación—don gratuito de Cristo—es la comunión con Dios y con los demás.”³⁸ Instead of speaking of liberation in terms of an exculpation or absolution, it ought to be thought of as an affirmation arising out of the negation of negation. Enrique Dussel calls this an “analectic,” as opposed to “dialectic,” moment:

Negative dialectic is no longer enough. The analectical moment is the support of new unfoldings... The analectical moment is the *affirmation* of exteriority... to affirm exteriority is to realize what is impossible for the system... it is to realize the *new*, what has not been foreseen by the totality, that which arises from freedom that is unconditioned, revolutionary, innovative.³⁹

The negative theoretical moment in which the oppressive system is denied is not enough for liberation: in fact, the negation of this process itself (the total abandonment of the present way of thinking and being in relation to domination) is still not enough. Dussel explains that true liberation only comes through the lived, engaged praxis of a new ethic of community beyond the oppressive order of sinfulness.⁴⁰

Since the act of liberation is not just negative but also positive (in that it brings about a new creation), one must think of sin as both an impediment to be overcome so as to move towards a more just future, and also (in its traditional sense) as a corruption of the self. What is impeded is the building up of *amistad*, fellowship, through love and in

³⁸ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 67. “Paul not only affirms that Christ freed us, but he also tells us that he freed us so that we are free. Free for what? Free in order to love... The fullness of liberation—given freely by Christ—is the communion with God and with others.”

³⁹ Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Eugene, OR : Wipf & Stock, 1985), § 5.3.1, 5.3.4.

⁴⁰ See Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 40.

community. Dussel explains in *Ethics and Community* that “The origin of evil or sin lies in a negation of the other, the other person, the other term of the person-to-person relationship.”⁴¹ The locus of the effects of sin is important to consider here: instead of focusing upon the corrupting influence of sin on the sinner, it is the Other, against whom the sinner commits his or her sin, who suffers the effects, whose existence is damaged. In this framework, the corruption of the sinner’s self through their evil act is secondary to the suffering of the victim, as well as the injury to the relation of fellowship. In a hierarchy of value, then, what emerges from this understanding of sin is that the life and soul of the other, as well as the person-person relation of love, are both more significant and damaging motivators for liberation than a simple corruption of the self. In point of fact, committing sin (i.e. denying the personhood of the other) reveals one’s self to oneself, but also reveals to the world the suffering self of the Other as well: in this sense it is “original” or “originary” sin.

Under the traditional definition of sin, however, the corruption of self receives its ethical warrant because of the relation of the created self in the reasonable order of God’s world. What is deficient in humankind comes about through a distancing or warping of what God makes and intends. So far the Creator’s relation to the notion of sin in Liberation Theology has seemed unclear: yet sin here too has to do with a distancing from God’s will and creation as well. Gutierrez writes that sin is a denial to love one’s neighbor, to love the other, and thus to deny to love the Lord himself. Dussel says explicitly that “Offence to God is always and antecedently an act of domination committed against one’s brother or sister. God is the absolute Other; hence God is offended when we dominate in some manner the other-and-neighbor. To dominate our

⁴¹ Ibid, 18.

neighbor is to sin against God.”⁴² What is remarkable about this way of thinking of sin is not simply that the failure to love or the active domination of one’s neighbor is of vital importance in an ethical sense: it is the fact that *all* sin is understood to be a violation of the person-person relation of love *first and foremost*. Instead of couching sin in terms of the violation of Divine Reason and Order, it must be thought of in terms of the Divine Love and Fellowship which, unlike the unreachable standard of omniscience, humans have access to and experience of in their everyday existence. Dussel goes on to say, “Day be day, dominators take on personal, individual *responsibility* for their sin of domination. After all, they daily assert the privileges and the potential (the opportunities) accruing to them in virtue of this inherited sin [of wealth]. And never again will dominators be able to claim innocence of that of which they have the use and enjoyment.”⁴³ There is no excuse for not recognizing one’s sin, on this account: there is no vast expanse between people and God to cloud one’s perception of the divine: those who commit a sin against their neighbor need only look into their victims’ face to recognize their guilt. In this way, the order that a sin violates is historical and mutable, not natural and deterministic.⁴⁴

Dussel uses the language of “domination” to describe the perpetuation of a non-loving, other-denying, person-to-non-person relation: “The *praxis of domination* is evil—sin (Gk. *Hamartia*). It is praxis, but not of person vis-à-vis another *as person*.”⁴⁵

According to Gutierrez, this domination plays out on three interrelated levels: that of the economic, political, and theological. These three levels “se interpenetran recíprocamente

⁴² Ibid, 19.

⁴³ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁴ See sections 2a and 3 below.

⁴⁵ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 18.

[penetrate one another reciprocally];”⁴⁶ that is, they cannot be separated from one another. Dussel distinguishes two levels to sin, but relates them in a similar fashion: “In the concrete...sin is an economic, political, sexual, ideological, or similar, domination. In the abstract...all concrete domination, albeit profane, will always and at the same time be sin *against God*.”⁴⁷ Whether speaking about the concrete versus abstract, or the socio-economic versus theological, these two authors are both thinking of sin as an activity of human persons in time and on Earth that simultaneously has implications that go beyond (e.g. for the relation of divine fellowship). In both Dussel’ and Gutierrez’s systems, God is the Absolute Other who stands beyond the system, but not in an inaccessible, radically transcendent way: rather, sin *contra Deum* is understood as analectically included in any sense of sin in the concrete.⁴⁸ Gutierrez says that one’s neighbor is “a visible reality [that] reveals to us and allows us to welcome the Lord,” but that cannot simply be treated as a means. It is in the active establishment of an agential relationship of friendship and love that God is revealed and that God’s presence in the world is revealed in the face of the Other. This is a striking departure from the traditional notion that God can remain unaffected by human sin, that God is neither diminished nor improved by human activity. In this framework, rather, the space between God and humanity is small, reduced down to the space between the oppressor and the oppressed, the dominator and the dominated, the sinner and the poor.

⁴⁶ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 67.

⁴⁷ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 143.

⁴⁸ Both Dussel and Gutierrez’s definitions of sin break down the notion of sin *contra rationem* in a number of ways, which is why I chose not to follow the intuitive juxtaposition with sin *contra Deum*.

a. The Other and The Poor

Both Dussel and Gutierrez employ the language of ‘the Other’ borrowed from Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas when they describe the person affected by a sinful act, yet beyond the use of terms like ‘*los demás*,’ ‘*los otros*,’ or ‘*el prójimo*,’ they go further in particularly naming these persons “*los pobres*,” the poor. For Gutierrez, this is a revealed truth contained in Christian Scripture: citing Deuteronomy 24:14-5 and Exodus 22: 21-3, he concludes that “Despreciar al prójimo...explotar al jornalero humilde y pobre, no pagar el salario a tiempo es offender a Dios...Inversamente, conocer, es decir amar, a Yahvé es hacer justicia al pobre y al humillado.”⁴⁹ Gutierrez draws a clear connection between recognizing and establishing a relationship of love with the poor and the revelation of Lord God. On this account, the latter cannot happen without the former, thus binding the epistemological warrant for faith to the ethical treatment of the poor. “Encontramos al Señor en nuestros encuentros con los hombres, en particular los más pobres, marginados y explotados por otros hombres.”⁵⁰ Dussel describes the “pobres y humillados” as those who live “exterior” to the system of wealth and privilege built up throughout the Modern period across the globe. In *Philosophy of Liberation*, he explains that the history of colonialism in Latin America must be understood as the product of a philosophical ideology that viewed all non-Europeans Others as non-human as well. “Being is the very foundation of the system, the totality of the sense of a culture, the macho world of the man of the center...Ontology, the thinking that expresses

⁴⁹ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 251. “To hold in contempt the outsider...to exploit the humble worker and the poor, to not pay their salary on time, is to offend God. Conversely, to recognize (that is, to love) the Lord is to act justly toward the poor and those who are laid low.”

⁵⁰ Ibid, 263. “We encounter the Lord in our encounters with human beings, and particularly with the poorest, most marginalized, and most exploited among them.” Dussel echoes this notion in *Ethics of Community*, writing that “Faith does not save, either, nor hope, nor the currency of the promise, unless these be accompanied by an *ethical* praxis...of effective service to the poor” (71).

Being... is the ideology of ideologies, the foundation of the ideologies of the empires, of the center.”⁵¹ This ideology of the center (both geopolitical and ontological) gives the warrant to treat those who live in the “periphery” of the system as non-persons, without the same recognition as those in the center. Dussel explains the political, historical and ideological formation of this system in *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism and Liberation Theology*, writing that “The ‘pseudo-scientific’ division of history into Antiquity (as antecedent), the Medieval Age (preparatory epoch), and the Modern Age (Europe) is an ideological and deforming organization of history.” He goes on to say that “the centrality of Europe in the ‘world-system’ is not sole fruit of an internal superiority accumulated during the European Middle Age over against other cultures. Instead, it is also the effect of the simple fact of the discovery, conquest, colonization, and integration (subsumption) of Amerindia (fundamentally).”⁵² The totalizing system of the center reinforces itself through this ideology of exclusivity, even as it takes advantage of the material and intellectual resources borne out of interaction with peoples and lands of the periphery. There is no escaping the system as it is presently instantiated: “Every individual ineluctably, whether he wishes it or not, whether he knows it or not, is part of a class, either the dominators of the dominated. The domination of sin thus shapes the domination of some classes over others and furthers the tension between them.”⁵³ Yet “beyond Being, transcending it, there is still reality. If reality is the order of the cosmic constitutions of things that are resistant, subsistent, ‘of themselves,’ it is evident that there

⁵¹ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 1.1.4.1, 1.1.4.3.

⁵² Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism and Liberation Theology*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 54.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 92.

is reality beyond being... Among the real things that retain exteriority to Being, one is found that has a history, a biography, freedom: another person.”⁵⁴ Dussel emphasizes that the people who reside beyond the purview of the system, those who fall into the class of the dominated, who live in suffering due to the neglect of their personhood by members of the center, are still very real. “Even in the extreme humiliation of prison, in the cold of the cell and the total pain of torture, even when the body is nothing but a quivering wound, a person can still cry: ‘I am another; I am a person; I have rights.’”⁵⁵ These victims of the system are “the poor” in terms of the system: in terms of reality, from the perspective of the “cosmos,”⁵⁶ of God, they are nonetheless human persons.

In *Ethics and Community*, Dussel explicitly relates this notion of the poor living in exteriority to the Gospel message by saying, “The bible calls the potential, possible future community—the object of the service of the one who is ethically just—the ‘crowd’... It indicates an indefinite number of poor who are not yet a ‘people’... These ‘many,’ who are outside the laws of the system, who indeed live ‘in exteriority’ even with respect to social class, are the special object of the good, the holy, human being, the person who practices justice, goodness, holiness, [and] love of the other as other.”⁵⁷ Just as Gutierrez describes the Christ’s revelation to humankind through the visible reality of the neighbor, Dussel asserts that the poor must be revealed as people to those *within* the system in order for the divine reconciliation of liberation to occur: “Forgiveness requires a clear, antecedent awareness of guilt on the part of the sinner... Without a real, objective,

⁵⁴ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 2.4.3.1-2.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 2.4.3.2.

⁵⁶ See Ibid, 2.2.3.1-2.

⁵⁷ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 41.

shared, historical equality between the two persons—which means that the ‘rich’ can no longer be rich nor the ‘poor’ poor—there can be no reconciliation.”⁵⁸

Within the literature of the theology of liberation, the only way to achieve such a leveling is by adopting the ‘perspective of the poor’ as a fundamental methodological principle for ethics. In his article “Fundamental Moral Theory in the Theology of Liberation,” Francisco Rejón asserts that “Liberation ethics expressly identifies the locus from which it is developed, that is, its point of view, its situation, and even its interlocutor. In other words, it takes its contextual position explicitly. This is what is meant by the expression *perspective of the poor*. Reality is explicitly observed from the locus of the poor, and with the eyes of the poor.”⁵⁹ Leonardo and Clodovis Boff further emphasize the necessity and authority of the self-revelation of the poor in *Introducing Liberation Theology*: “The oppressed are more than what social analysts—economists, sociologists, anthropologists—can tell us about them. We need to listen to the oppressed themselves. The poor, in their popular wisdom, in fact ‘know’ much more about poverty than does any economist. Or rather, they know in another way, in much greater depth.”⁶⁰ Liberation theology does not descend theoretically upon the world, principles in hand, but instead began as a critical response to the situation of the people of Latin America. Its origins are not highly formalized, but instead ring with a pragmatic sense of the reality and immediacy of experience: “No special discernment is needed to identify objective sin in the situation that the people of Latin America are living. It is all around us...Sin cannot

⁵⁸ Ibid, 34.

⁵⁹ Francisco Moreno Rejón, “Fundamental Moral Theory in the Theology of Liberation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 214-5.

⁶⁰ Leonard and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 30.

be studied abstractly; it is concretely present in subtle forms that require more careful theological analysis.”⁶¹ As we have already seen, sin is understood to be a fact of human existence in the Western Christian tradition: that this fact is the foundation upon which the entire critical analysis of Liberation Theology stands, however, and that this fact of experience is taken up in a way that is specifically geopolitically and socio-historically oriented is what makes this way of thinking unique within the tradition.

From the lived experience of the poor, the depth of oppression is revealed as sin because sin goes beyond mere individual or systemic economic or political violence: its effects are existential as well, affecting the whole person of the victim. These various levels of the concrete manifestations of sin (economic, political, erotic, pedagogical) are blended together under the general category of the ‘rupture of divine fellowship,’ which is the essential element of a sinful act. These sinful acts exhibit what are very real effects of domination upon human beings: upon their bodies, upon their spirits, upon their communities. Yet when one takes a step back and reflects upon sin at the level of world, system, and universe, it is clear that the minutia of domination can also be thought of as Absolute Sin against the Absolute Other (God). Reconciliation with God and one’s fellow human, then, comes only as a *total* liberating response to this type of oppression.

b. The “Coloniality of Being” as the Sin of the World

For Liberation Theologians, sin must be thought of in the concrete, lived experience of its victims in Latin America: this is the beginning of the salvific process of liberation. One way in which this becomes clear (as has already been shown) is through

⁶¹ Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Historicity of Christian Salvation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 276.

the historicization of sin, and the identification of sin with the lived *praxis* of domination. Along with Dussel and Gutierrez, other Latin American thinkers have tried to articulate a historical analysis of this praxis at work in their land, in order to show that the systemic oppression wrought upon the people of Latin America is neither natural (and therefore a part of God's rational Creation) nor just. The concept of the "coloniality of Being," articulated by Walter Mignolo in the early 2000s as a development of Dussel's historicization of non-personhood, describes how the praxis of domination at work in the conquest of the Americas reciprocally came to inform an understanding and justification for oppression, masking what would become the "sin of the world" in Latin America and the rest of the Global South under the system of global capitalism.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres, in his article "On the Coloniality of Being," breaks down the concept into its constitutive parts by explaining that "Coloniality...refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, *intersubjective relations*, and *knowledge production* well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration."⁶² In the wake of the conquest of Latin America by Iberian conquistadores (as well as the implementation of colonial administrations in other parts of the world like India and Africa), a system of power developed that has effects beyond simple economic or political control. The first result of colonialism (the "discovery" of the Americas), in fact, was a philosophical analysis of the "anthropological colonial difference between the *ego conquistador* [the "I who conquers"] and the *ego conquistado* [the "I who is conquered"]. The very relationship between colonizer and colonized provided a new model to understand the relationship

⁶² Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2-3 (March/May 2007), 243 (emphasis added).

between the soul or mind and the body.”⁶³ Maldonado-Torres asserts a view he shares with Dussel, Mignolo, Anibal Quijano and many other Latin American thinkers that the beginning of modern philosophy, with its skepticism of the nominalist-realist debate and its emphasis upon science, is rooted in the assertion of power through conquest and the subsequent dehumanization of the conquered people of Latin America. That there were two distinct kinds of person (the conqueror and the conquered, the self and the other, the rich and the poor) came to pervade modern systems of power, but more than that, it came to redefine persons at the ontological level.

This is where the “sin of the world” becomes manifest: on this account, the “coloniality of Being” is a corruption of the conquered person’s originary self: i.e., a fully human person, a freely-willing agent, created in the *imago Dei*. It is a mortal sin that locates its enduring effects in the body of its victims: their entire being is corrupted, and they stand *reatus* [condemned] before the system. The historical process of colonialization in Latin America is a structural and systemic sin committed against the colonized, who are torn from the created order and made to suffer.⁶⁴ This sin can be seen clearly manifested in the forms of racism⁶⁵ and classism that underlay the colonial economic system in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the global capitalist system in the 20th

⁶³ Ibid, 245.

⁶⁴ Maldonado-Torres goes on to claim that “*Indeed, coloniality of Being primarily refers to the normalization of the extraordinary events that take place in war. While in war there is murder and rape, in the hell of the colonial world murder and rape become day to day occurrences and menaces. ‘Killability’ and ‘rapability’ are inscribed into the images of the colonial bodies’* (255). The corruption of the personhood of the colonized thus opens the door for further sin and suffering by masking the ethical imperative to love one’s fellow human being (precisely because the colonized is no longer a human being).

⁶⁵ See Maldonado-Torres 244; see also Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power: Eurocentrism and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1.3. (2000), 534-5.

century.⁶⁶ The historical and existential effects of this system come to define the divides among people and the limits of ethical behavior; by labeling them with the category of sin, however, those limits are exposed in contrast to the absolute ethics of *Amistad* and community.

2. Structures of Sin

The fundamental thesis echoed throughout liberation theology is that “The death of the poor is the death of God, the ongoing crucifixion of the Son of God. Sin is the negation of God; the negation of sin moves, sometimes in unknown ways, toward the affirmation of God, toward the presence of God as the giver of life.”⁶⁷ This claim comes out of an interpretation of St. Paul’s epistles, as evidenced in the scriptural citations Gutierrez includes along with his definition of sin. Beyond the strain of Pauline thought wherein sin is a rupture of divine fellowship, the idea of sin in Liberation Theology is also linked strongly to Paul’s commentaries on what he calls “the Law.” While the former notion of sin as a rupture of divine *Amistad* tends towards a consideration of interpersonal relations in community, connection sinfulness to “the Law” cashes out in Liberation Theology as an analysis of economic and political elements that operate above the level of the individual. This is not to say that sin is ever divorced from the individual: on the contrary, that sins are acts of individual human agents is vital the historicity of the concepts of domination and liberation. In keeping with the tradition, sin is seen as a negative act, but that nonetheless is always also a positive assertion of some individual human will or agency. According to Dussel, individuals who sin through acts of

⁶⁶ See Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 533-7.

⁶⁷ Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Historicity of Christian Salvation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 276

domination are “condemned (second death) to eternal death, deserved by reason of their responsibility (also personal and individual) exercised in the murder of the poor.”⁶⁸ Yet as Jon Sobrino explains, “Structures manifest and actualize the power of sin, thereby causing sin, by making it exceedingly difficult for men and women to lead the life that is rightfully theirs as the daughters and sons of God. This sinful power is utterly real.”⁶⁹ Some view these two claims (holding every dominating sinner accountable for their sin vs. faulting structures of oppression) as in tension or even contradiction with one another, it is clear from the writing of Dussel that they actually are inseparable facts of experience: “True enough, speaking *abstractly* one can say that John, the individual, has sinned. But *concretely* John is Mary’s father and Martha’s spouse, Peter’s sibling, his pupils’ teacher, a citizen of his country, and so on. His is *never*—not even before God—solitary and alone: in the *concrete*, he is never *this* solitary individual. Likewise, his fault or sin is never solitary in the concrete.”⁷⁰ Dussel’s assertion that “no man is an island” shows the methodological moment in which liberation theology must (as an appropriate response to the concrete situation of the individual) move into the more theoretically transcendent realm of political, social and economic structures. Coming to know the ways in which these structures manifest sin is the primary goal of the historical-critical analysis of the liberation theologian.

⁶⁸ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 26.

⁶⁹ Jon Sobrino, “Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 355.

⁷⁰ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 21. Dussel’s claim that one’s sin is never solitary “even before God” reflects his theology of God’s presence in and through the historical actuality of human communities, and not removed, sitting on high upon a throne, judging His people from afar.

Franz Hinkelammert's *The Ideological Weapons of Death* is one of the best examples of this type of analysis.⁷¹ Drawing upon the Pauline juxtaposition of life and death found most prominently in the Epistle to the Romans, Hinkelammert asserts that "Sin brought death and is oriented toward death. The law is the negation of sin, which for its part reproduces and reinforces sin and therefore also leads to death. Sin and law belong together, both mutually excluding and mutually reinforcing one another."⁷² While intuitively one might think that systems of law and social organization that are intended to combat sin would always be beneficial, Hinkelammert observes that in fact this kind of negation of sin only compounds the dominating power of sin by heaping oppression upon oppression. "The more the law tries to expel sin, the more power sin has. In this connection Paul treats sin as a subject dwelling within the human subject... Sin acts on its own and takes over a person's body."⁷³ This abdication of subjectivity on the one hand appears to absolve the individual person of any responsibility for their acts of domination. In point of fact, however, the negation of one's own agency is in itself the beginning of the act of sin: the acceptance of an oppressive system is itself a rejection of the person-person nature of truly ethical human praxis.

Economic and political structures can be judged then by the degree to which they either 1) impede human subjectivity, or 2) break down the divine fellowship of the person-person relation. Often, however, these systems are well-entrenched in human communities: Dussel describes this phenomenon through what he calls the "Babylon

⁷¹ In his foreword to Hinkelammert's book, Cornel West states that "Hinkelammert boldly contests the complacency of [First World biblical scholars] by putting forward a highly controversial and provocative reading of Pauline conceptions of and death in light of his own analysis of fetishism" (vii).

⁷² Franz Hinkelammert, *The Ideological Weapons of Death*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 133-4.

⁷³ Hinkelammert, *The Ideological Weapons of Death*, 134.

Principle,” which describes a system as “closed in upon itself. It has replaced the universal human project with its own particular historical project. Its laws become natural, its virtues perfect, and the blood of those who offer any resistance—the blood of the prophets and heroes—is spilled by the system as if it were the blood of the wicked, the totally subversive.”⁷⁴ Structural oppression of this type leads to the “ongoing crucifixion of the Son of God,” which is a continuous violence perpetrated without recourse to a moral standard extant within the system to end it. “Any system of prevailing, dominant practices...determines its established practices to be good...Domination and sin have been transformed into the very foundation of reality. Perverse praxis is now goodness and justice.”⁷⁵ The “perverse justice” of a dominating social structure is precisely what Paul was referring to in his critique of ‘the Law,’ and why his letters exhorted his followers to place their faith beyond the present system, beyond the present world in the risen Christ, in whom all people are joined in one body as one human family.⁷⁶

Dussel’s insistence upon the point that structures of oppression can become invisible recalls Milgrom’s interpretation of the Levitical חמא, in which a person violates covenantal purity laws in an unintentional way. In both cases, it is not the intention of the person who commits the sin to knowingly violate a transcendental ethical principle: yet

⁷⁴ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 31-2.

⁷⁶ In his essay on sin in Liberation Theology in *Mysterium Liberationis*, José Faus writes that “Latin American theology has recovered another fundamental scriptural idea—the Johannine notion of the sin of the world. This notion is so central to the evangelist that sometimes he calls the sin of the world simply ‘the world,’ giving the world a negative significance it does not always have in his gospel. In these cases ‘the world’ means a socioreligious order hostile to God or an oppressive system based on money or power for the few. This sin make the world unable to grasp the truth: the truth that God is a Father and Just (cf. John 17:25) and human beings are therefore God’s children and brothers and sisters of one another” (536).

intention ultimately does not determine culpability, nor does it lessen the effect of the sin upon the victim. Dussel is claiming here that one could be willing ends within an oppressive system that appear virtuous and noble (in the terms of the system), but that nonetheless bring harm upon the poor, and that this is just as much a sin as those who willfully wrong their neighbor. This is also what Hinkelammert means when he states that “sin” asserts its own agency within a person (though in this case, Hinkelammert has collapsed intention into agency in a way that Dussel does not). Finally, José Faus adds that while “sin is masked from human beings (or rather it is human beings who mask it from themselves) to the point where the sense of guilt becomes anesthetized... Jesus comes to unmask this sin.”⁷⁷ The biblical hermeneutic of Liberation Theology is thus oriented towards bringing out sin in both its willed and unintentional (or at least unrecognized) forms, just as the socio-critical methodology of Liberation Theology seeks to reveal the sinfulness of the systems in which the poor live in domination. This fundamental concept of the “sin of the world”⁷⁸ is the lens through which liberation theologians came to recognize the levels of oppression that dominate the poor and cause the kind of suffering and corruption of the spirit of divine fellowship that keeps the world in darkness.

a. Three Levels of Oppression: Political, Economic, and Theological

Part of the unique critical stance of Liberation Theologians and Philosophers of Liberation is their multivalent approach that refuses to understand the dynamics of oppression and revolution in terms of a single process of history. For example, Enrique

⁷⁷ José Ignacio González Faus, “Sin,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 535.

⁷⁸ Found in the works of Dussel, Gutierrez, Faus, Hinkelammert, Gutierrez, Boff, et al.

Dussel's *Philosophy of Liberation* describes five different levels of liberation: political, economic, pedagogical, erotic, scientific, and semiotic.⁷⁹ Gutierrez names three “niveles de significación [levels of signification]” of the notion of liberation: “liberación política, liberación del hombre a lo largo de la historia, liberación del pecado y entrada en comunión con Dios [political liberation, liberation of the human in the course of history, (and) liberation from sin and the entrance into communion with God].” He describes these three levels as “[condicionandose] mutuamente, pero no se confunden; no se dan el uno sin el otro, pero son distintos: forman parte de un proceso salvífico único y global, pero se sitúan en profundidades diferentes.”⁸⁰ Gutierrez's three levels of liberation (political, historical, and theological [the level of redemption from sin]) are merely levels of meaning describing what he calls a single process of liberation that occurs both at the level of the individual and the world. Taking a cue from Gutierrez's subtitle to *Teología de la Liberación*, it is perhaps more accurate to think of these different levels as different “perspectives” from which the process of human history can be examined. Instead of thinking through history from one singular perspective, such as a pure Marxist analysis of economy, or a Hegelian analysis in terms of the development and movement of *Geist*, or even a traditional theological analysis that would view human history purely in terms of its relation to the divine order as it is expressed in scripture, Liberation theology strives to give an inclusive analysis that can give a complete picture of the forces of life and death at odds with one another in the historical process of liberation.

⁷⁹ See Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 3.1-3, 4.1-5.1.

⁸⁰ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 238. “They are mutually conditional [that is, the effect each other mutually], but they do not confound one another. You cannot have one without the other, but they are distinct: they are a part of a singular, global salvific process, but they are based on different grounds.”

Gutierrez justifies this multivalent approach partly in terms of a critique of the Euro-American view of “*desarrollo* [development]” in the so-called “third world” of Latin America. The terms “development” and “dependence” both came into vogue in the 1950s and 60s to describe the relation of the hegemonic global North with Latin America and other countries at the periphery of the world system, and were integrated into the mission of the Catholic Church through their prominence in such documents as *Pacem in Terris* (1963), *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), and *Populorum Progressio* (1967). Gutierrez recognized, however, that the notions of development and dependence could lead either to “vislumbrar la necesidad de sacudirse de esa dependencia, de liberarse de ella...o se la reduzca a un horizonte puramente económico y social.”⁸¹ One of the central theses of Gutierrez’s text is that theologians cannot simply dodge the question of economic and social dependence and oppression by claiming that they have nothing to say of the matter: in fact, the analysis at the level of the global system, and then at the level of humanity’s relation to God both take the notion of development and not only humanize it, but even make it holy and divine. Dussel writes that “To assert that the poverty of the poor (which means their death) stems naturally from the will of God, or to pretend to a reconciliation that would take place without an *antecedent* hatred of the world and praxis of justice, are propositions of a theology of domination.”⁸² The oppression suffered by the poor, when illuminated by a thoroughgoing political, historical, economic and theological critique, ceases to be a merely theoretical reality expressed in statistics or the vast spans of the cycles of history. Instead, the suffering of the poor is recognized for what it is: the sin of

⁸¹ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 63. “[It could] obscure the necessity of removing oneself from that dependence, of freeing oneself from it...or [it could] reduce dependence to a purely economic or social matter.”

⁸² Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 34.

the world, a complete and total corruption of self and victim at the level of the individual and society, a wrong that can and should be rectified through a process that liberates the poor from the suffering of the system.

3. Liberation from Sin

*“The God who pitied the downtrodden and the Christ who came to set prisoners free proclaim themselves with a new face and in a new image today. The eternal salvation they offer is mediated by the historical liberations that dignify the children of God and render credible the coming utopia of freedom, justice, love, and peace, the kingdom of God in the midst of humankind.”*⁸³

“Liberation” is a historically and geopolitically situated response to the sin of the world, that is, to the structural forces of oppression and the individuals who instantiate this domination in the lives of their neighbors. It is the expiation of sin through the power of the Gospel, the call to divine fellowship that not only accepts the Other, but unites self and Other in *Amistad*. Through the process of liberation, what comes about is not merely a revolt against the system that brings down death upon the heads of the poor, but the creation of something new: “The new Earth is not anticipated individually but *in community with all humankind*. The center of this anticipation, according to Paul, is love for neighbor, which is the nucleus of ethics and the decisive point for working out morality.”⁸⁴ As Gutierrez stated in his definition of sin and liberation, freedom from sin (liberation) enables humans to be free to live in fellowship with one another, that is, in *community* with one another.

⁸³ Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 8-9.

⁸⁴ Hinkleammert, *Ideological Weapons*, 136, emphasis added.

This orientation towards community is where Dussel sees the great moral strength of the Theology of Liberation. This can be seen in his description of the “Jerusalem Principle,” which he juxtaposes to the “Babylon Principle”: “The hope of the new Jerusalem is the ‘Jerusalem principle.’ It is a utopian Christianity that believes in the reign of God, hates the Prince of ‘this world’ and his reign, and inaugurates a praxis of liberation where all will receive ‘on the basis of each one’s need.’ But in order for Jerusalem to exist, obviously Babylon must be destroyed, and the poor, the heroes, the saints, and the martyrs rejoice at its fall.”⁸⁵ The liberated community, the first fruit of liberation, is characterized by three factors: 1) the destruction of the prevailing order; 2) utopianism (relative to the current world system); and 3) a praxis (ethical practice) that recognizes the Other as brother/sister in Christ. Utopia, generally taken as an ethereal concept useful for metaphysical and ethical theorization, is in the case of Liberation Theology viewed as something that is not only of this world, but is actively manifested in the process of liberation. Dussel and Hinkelammert explain this best through their readings of Paul: “Saint Paul spoke of ‘madness’ (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16): that which is absurd for the prevailing morality. For the dominant, present rationality, which dictates the true and the false...the construction of the new Jerusalem is the absolute evil (because it calls in question the current system in its totality).”⁸⁶ Gutierrez similarly talks about the utopian Reign of God as “[surgendo] con renovada energía en momentos de transición y de crisis, cuando la etapa en que se halla la ciencia llega a límites en su explicación de la realidad social, y cuando se abren nuevas sendas a la

⁸⁵ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 52.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

praxis historica. La utopía, así comprendida, no es ni opuesta ni exterior a la ciencia.”⁸⁷ The utopianism that characterizes the praxis of liberation is an engaged, critical utopianism, one that is emergent in history, rather than transcendent. Liberation is a calculated response to the sin of the world: Gutierrez calls it a “denuncia y anuncio [denunciation and annunciation]” that “se pueden realizar *en* la praxis....Si la utopía no lleva a una acción en el presente, es una evasión de la realidad.”⁸⁸ The instantiation of this utopian “Kingdom of God” is the necessary rebellion against the pervasive sin of the world: “The Kingdom of God can never be identified with the prevailing system. Any passive acceptance of the powers that be, of the order of oppression, is a denial of the Kingdom.”⁸⁹

At the same time, liberation is also characterized in Christological terms in the Theology of Liberation. More often than not, the Exodus is pointed to as a scriptural example of this revolutionary overthrowing of the prevailing system of slavery and death and the establishment of a free people: however, Gutierrez also points out that “La obra de Cristo se inscribirá en este movimiento, llevándolo a su pleno cumplimiento....[porque] La obra de Cristo es una nueva creación... Más todavía, es en esta ‘nueva creación’, es decir, en la salvación que aporta Cristo,

⁸⁷ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 313. “[The Reign of God] surges up with renewed energy in moments of transition and crisis, when the age in which the current science arrives at limits in its explication of social reality, and when new paths open themselves to historical praxis. Utopia, understood in this way, is neither opposed nor exterior to science.”

⁸⁸ Ibid, 312.

⁸⁹ Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy*, 93.

donde la creación adquiere su pleno sentido.”⁹⁰ The Exodus is a historical moment of liberation: in Christ, however, all of history, all of creation comes into a state of liberation. The epitome of God’s creation, made manifest in Christ, is the unity of the human community: “All human bodies—joined in unity—make up the body of Christ. According to Paul, Christ lives in the bodily life of human beings...which is where God’s love dwells.”⁹¹

Beyond its orientation towards the utopian, meta-systemic Reign of God, however, the process of liberation is built upon a praxis and epistemology of *faith*. “The theology of liberation understands itself as a reflection from faith on the historical reality and action of the people of God, who follow the work of Jesus in announcing and fulfilling the Kingdom. It understands itself as an action by the people of God in following the work of Jesus and, as Jesus did, it tries to establish a living connection between the world of God and the human world.”⁹² The work of the Liberation Theologian is a part of the process of liberation, in that, through the perspective of poor, theologians give voice to the Gospel of liberation revealed in the being of Christ and already present on the periphery of the world system. Hinkelammert writes that “In the world of grace and life [kingdom of God], Paul does not know sin: sin in fact means leaving that world.”⁹³ An epistemology of “faith” in this sense does not mean a belief in what is not real, but in what exists

⁹⁰ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 208. “The work of Christ will inscribe itself upon this movement, carrying it to its full completion...because the work of Christ is a new creation...Moreover, it is in this ‘new creation,’ that is, in the salvation that Christ provides, where ‘creation’ achieves its full sense.”

⁹¹ Hinkelammert, *Ideological Weapons*, 141.

⁹² Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 543.

⁹³ Hinkelammert, *Ideological Weapons*, 138.

beyond the world system; in this sense it is transcendent. Yet at the same time the object of this belief, the Kingdom of God and liberation from oppression, is completely of this world: “Faith...leads to a subject constituted on the basis of the coming unity among human beings. Subjectivity comes about on the basis of love for neighbor, and so its starting point is life.”⁹⁴ This epistemological orientation towards what is beyond the present system is the essential character of a liberatory interpretation of the Gospel in the context of history: “The gospel abides as the fundamental horizon, the ultimate ethical reference, of all Christian praxis, that of the social magisterium of the church as well as that of the ethical conscience of the saints and prophets. In reality the only infallible, absolute, really Christian, ‘once and for all’ (*hapax*) ‘social teaching’ is the gospel.”⁹⁵ Faith, hope, and love orient the process of liberation, both as principles of praxis and necessarily as epistemological mandates for hermeneutics and critical analysis of the world’s structures of oppression and domination. Yet Dussel also states that “Faith does not save, nor hope, nor the currency of the promise, unless these be accompanied by an *ethical* praxis (no longer a *moral* praxis, such as has prevailed in the past, under a regime of domination) of effective service to the poor in the construction of the new order.”⁹⁶ Activity in service to the poor and in service to what is beyond the present morality of the system that dominates them should always ground the faith and hope for liberation in human life.

⁹⁴ Hinkleammert, *Ideological Weapons*, 143.

⁹⁵ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 211.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 71.

This process of liberation from sin, like the occurrence of sin itself, is thus always situated in history. Gutierrez writes that “Es en el templo donde encontramos a Dios. Pero se trata de un templo de piedras vivas, de hombres estrechamente relacionados entre ellos, que hacen juntos la historia y se forjan a sí mismos....El templo de Dios es la historia humana, lo ‘sagrado’ sale de los estrechos límites de los lugares de culto.”⁹⁷ The divisions between sacred and profane, socio-political and religious are broken down in the process of liberation, because liberation encompasses the entirety of human experience. The totality of creation is reflected in the face of God: in Christ, the Word incarnated, that totality is humanized, and the whole of human life takes on the significance of divine approbation and redemption. This is what makes the oppression of this world sin: it is what makes the liberation of the poor and the establishment of a just and loving community a divine salvation from sin.

a. *Regnum Dei* [The Reign of God]

The concept of the “Reign of God” is at the center of the liberation process: it is the telos towards which liberation tends, yet it is also already manifested in human history and experience. This paradoxical notion arises out of a scriptural inconsistency that often troubles theologians: “The kingdom is not just in the future, for it is ‘in our midst’ (Luke 17:21); it is not a kingdom ‘of this world’ (John 18:36), but it nevertheless

⁹⁷ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 262-3. “It is in the temple where we find God; that is, in a temple made of living stones, of people bound up in relation to each other, who together drive history and forge themselves for themselves...The temple of God is human history; the ‘sacred’ goes out beyond the constrictive limits of sites of worship.”

begins to come about in this world.”⁹⁸ As has been shown, however, thinkers of Liberation Theology take these competing passages to point to the utopian character of what might be called the “state of liberation” anticipated and worked towards within the world system. It is both a concept by which the “historical wickedness of the world, and thereby the reign of sin” is exposed, which is why it is “the most adequate reality for expressing liberation,”⁹⁹ its antithesis. Yet Dussel explains that this principle asserts itself in human life and praxis as well:

The reign of God is total fulfillment. Some are poor now, but “the reign of God is theirs” (Matt. 5:3)...In confrontation with present negatives, the reign of God is present as the full realization of the human being as absolute, irreversible, undiminished positivity... True, the reign develops mysteriously in every man and woman of good will; but it must not be forgotten that the privileged place of its presence is the *community*... The *community* itself, community life itself, was *already* the reality of the reign: merely under way, inaugurated, still in the pangs of birth, it is true—but *reality*.¹⁰⁰

Dussel does not state that the Kingdom of God is not just some future telos that is unrecognizable in this world, but is actively present whenever the “absolute, irreversible, undiminished positivity” of the individual is expressed in human life. According to Dussel, this occurs first and foremost in community, that is, in relationships of self and Other. In such a community, where two and three are gathered in common fellowship and history and purpose, the Reign of God is present (cf. Matthew 18:20). Dussel tempers his

⁹⁸ Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 52.

⁹⁹ Sobrino, “Central Position of the Reign of God,” 355, 352.

¹⁰⁰ Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 13-4.

claims with the recognition that God's Kingdom is "still in the pangs of birth," claiming that "Where there is sin (and the absolute non-existence of sin would entail its necessary non-existence, and thus an actually realized, post-historical reign of heaven), there must always be dominated, or poor." but asserts that, through the praxis of liberation, it will indeed grow. "The *radical principle* of Christian ethics in general and of liberation and community ethics (which is the central aspect of basic theology) in particular... is the face-to-face of the person-to-person relationship in the concrete, real, satisfied, happy, *community* in the gladness of being *one* with God."¹⁰¹ From this recognition, Dussel asserts what he calls "the Absolute Principle of Ethics": "Liberate the Poor."

The principle "Liberate the poor" implies: (1) a totality, a prevailing *moral* system; (2) an *oppressor* (sinner), the agent of the act of domination; (3) someone just (at least where the relationship of oppressor-oppressed is concerned) who is being treated unjustly. At the same time, "Liberate *the poor*" presupposes: (4) the importance of keeping account of mechanisms of sin; (5) the ethical duty of dismantling these mechanisms; (6) the necessity of constructing an escape route from the system; (7) the obligation to build the new system of justice."¹⁰²

In this principle, Dussel sums up the practical aspects of Liberation Theology. He states that this principle is "absolute (not relative), and nevertheless *concrete*,"¹⁰³ that the truths it expresses and the demands it makes are true and just in all places and at all times. Just as the Gospel is the fundamental ground of interpretation for Christian ethics, Dussel is claiming here that this principle is the best articulation of that message. In this sense, he

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 16.

¹⁰² Ibid, 73-4.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 76.

echoes the “option for the poor” which is central to Liberation Theology, as well as the analectic (as opposed to dialectic) relation of God and Christ to the poor of the world here and now.

4. Summary

While the traditional definition of sin in Western Christianity focuses upon the corruption of the sinner’s soul and his/her relation to God through an act in violation to the order of creation, Liberation Theology proposes a notion of sin that identifies the locus of the corrupting effects of sin in the body and being of the Other (the poor), in the person-to-person relationship, thereby doing damage to the all-encompassing presence of the Divine in community. God does not stand beyond the creation in judgment, but bears the brunt of such domination in the person of Jesus Christ and in the ongoing violence of human history. Yet beyond his suffering, there is also hope in Christ for the liberation of the poor and the realization of their full subjectivity in the Kingdom of Heaven. Truly Christian ethics are oriented towards the transcendence of the present system of violence and domination (sin) through a praxis of liberation that recognizes the Other as a brother or sister in Christ. This teleological orientation has much in common with the traditional notion of sin, since sin is an impediment to full realization of the self for the poor (though the sin is not their own). The ongoing struggle towards realizing this liberated state of being drives human history, sacralizing the geopolitical conflicts once viewed as issues unrelated to faithful Christianity.

The Theology of Liberation is a critical undertaking of the singular and absolute ethical principle of liberating the poor, taking as its foundation the perspective of the poor

and the Gospel (*evangelion*) of Christ. This is a radical departure from the view of the sacerdotal expiation of sin through the Church for one's own personal sake: moreover, it calls into question the very nature of what the Body of Christ truly is. Theology of Liberation sees the liberation of sin not just as a denial of the inherent oppression of human history, but as the positive building up of a faithful community, the Kingdom of God in our midst, a much more anthropocentric specification of the fruits of salvation than the one given alongside the traditional definition of sin (namely that the restoration of sin restores the individual's soul and the integrity of the Creation). It is a critical response to the Latin American experience of the "coloniality of Being," of oppression, suffering, hunger, and the death that pervade everyday experience: it is a Gospel for the colonized, the poor, the victims of the "sin of the world" whose only hope of salvation (that is, of *life itself*) is liberation.

In the following section, I will analyze two responses to the characterization of sin in Liberation Theology. The first comes out of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's (Pope Benedict XVI) 1984 "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'," and Pope John Paul II's 1979 address to the third Puebla council of Latin American Bishops. These two works represent the orthodox critique of the theology on doctrinal grounds. Second, I will reconsider the identity of the 'sinner' and 'the poor' given in Liberation Theology's concept of sin through a philosophical analysis and reading of Josiah Royce's *The Problem of Christianity*, in which he discusses Pauline notions of community and reconciliation that stand at odds with certain problematic aspects of liberation theology.

CHAPTER III
TWO CRITICISMS OF THE CONCEPT OF SIN IN THE THEOLOGY OF
LIBERATION

A. Criticism from the Magisterium: Pope John Paul II's Address to the Puebla
Conference (1979) and Joseph Ratzinger's "Instruction" (1984)

*"The Church is born of our response in faith to Christ. In fact, it is by sincere acceptance of the Good News that we believers gather together in Jesus' name in order to seek together the Kingdom, build it up and live it. The Church is 'the assembly of those who in faith look to Jesus as the cause of salvation and the source of unity and peace.'"*¹⁰⁴

In *Teología de la Liberación*, Gutierrez states that the Catholic Church in Latin America had begun to shake off its former role as a part of the system of oppression at work in society, and that the practical expressions of the "option for the poor" already visible across the continent reflected the intellectual work of Liberation Theologians. Yet he also recognizes that the situation of the Latin American Church is unique within the larger Catholic Church. "La iglesia, hasta hoy estrechamente ligada al orden actual, comienza a situarse en forma diversa frente a la situación de despojo, opresión y alienación que se vive en América latina."¹⁰⁵ Latin American Liberation Theology as a movement within the Catholic Church came to prominence during the time of the second Vatican Council, yet as Gutierrez states, it cannot be seen as having its origins in the

¹⁰⁴ John Paul II, "Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate: Address of His holiness John Paul II," Libreria Editrice Vaticana (1979), accessed 1 April 2012 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1979/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19790128_messico-puebla-episc-latam_en.html>, § I.6.

¹⁰⁵ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 173. "The Church, which today is loosely linked with the established order, must begin to position itself in a new way in response to the situation of poverty, oppression and alienation that is alive and well in Latin America."

declared intentions of Vatican II to make the Church a “Church of the Poor.” According to Peter Hebblethwaite, a Jesuit priest who wrote on Vatican affairs for the *National Catholic Reporter* from the time of Vatican II through the 1990s, the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), first convoked in 1955, was divided from its founding between proponents of liberation theology and reactionary conservatives who decried the new movement of thought as doctrinally impure, atheistic, and Marxist.¹⁰⁶ However, in the years following Vatican II in 1965 and the landmark council at Medellín in 1968, the “option for the poor” and the recognition of the pervasive injustices of the global economy began to gain prominence within the mainstream of Catholic Church policy. Pope Paul VI’s 1974 “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” cautiously endorsed the option for the poor, but reinforced doctrinal limits on the interpretations of Liberation Theologians that the more conservative John Paul II would come to reinforce when he took his definitive stand on the topic five years later at the third meeting of the CELAM at Puebla.¹⁰⁷

Pope John Paul II’s address to the conference at Puebla and the “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’” composed at his request by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (then head of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and now Pope Benedict XVI) in 1985 focus upon three primary areas of critique in their discussions of liberation theology: the “purity” of the doctrines of the Catholic faith, the emphasis upon praxis within and beyond the Church, and the conflation of the sacred and profane. All three sets of concerns originate in what appears to be a fundamental

¹⁰⁶ Gutierrez describes the state of the Church in Latin America in *Teología* by saying “La realidad latinoamericana, el *momento histórico* que atraviesa América Latina es *profundamente conflictual*... Debemos aprender a vivir y pensar la paz en el conflicto, lo definitivo en lo histórico [The Latin American reality, the *historical moment* that pervades Latin America is *profoundly conflictual*... We ought to learn to live and think peace in conflict, the definitive in the historical.]” (178-9).

¹⁰⁷ Hebblethwaite, “Liberation theology and the Roman Catholic Church,” 209-12.

misreading of the primary documents of Liberation Theology already examined in this study: however, as will become clear, the concerns of the Magisterium reflect the traditional ontological/metaphysical definition of sin viewed and imposed from the perspective of the center (the dominator).

1. Doctrinal Purity

It is worth mentioning at the outset that these documents do not wholly condemn the concepts of Liberation Theology. On the contrary, Benedict XVI begins his “Instruction” by endorsing the fundamental definition of liberation as freedom “from the radical slavery of sin. Its end and its goal is the freedom of the children of God, which is the gift of grace.”¹⁰⁸ Benedict XVI likewise picks up on the centrality of the notion of sin in his section on the “Biblical Foundations” of Liberation Theology, writing that “Christ, our Liberator, has freed us from sin and from slavery to the Law and to the flesh, which is the mark of the condition of sinful mankind... This means that the most radical form of slavery is slavery to sin. Other forms of slavery find their deepest root in slavery to sin... Freedom is a new life in love.”¹⁰⁹ Benedict XVI clearly agrees that the pervasive nature of sin is a constraint upon human subjectivity, and that the power of liberation comes in the freedom it gives to live into a life of love and fellowship: “The commandment of fraternal love extended to all mankind thus provides the supreme rule of social life. There are no discriminations or limitations which can counter the

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), “Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’,” Libreria Editrice Vaticana (1984), accessed 15 March 2012 <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html>, preface.

¹⁰⁹ Benedict XVI, “Instruction,” § VI.2.

recognition of everyone as ‘neighbor’.”¹¹⁰ In these senses, the Theology of Liberation “designates a theological reflection centered on the biblical theme of liberation and freedom, and on the urgency of its practical realization”¹¹¹ that is perfectly valid and in keeping with the mission of the Church.

However, John Paul II’s pseudo-endorsement of the themes of Theology of Liberation in his address at Puebla reveals wherein the view of the Magisterium begins to diverge from that of the Liberation Theologians: “Let us also keep in mind that the Church’s action in earthly matters such as human advancement, development, justice, the rights of the individual, is always intended to be at the service of man; and of man as she sees him in the Christian vision of the anthropology that she adopts.”¹¹² Throughout his address, John Paul II harps upon the need “To be watchful for purity of doctrine, the basis in building up the Christian community, [which] is therefore, together with the proclamation of the Gospel, the primary and irreplaceable duty of the Pastor, of the Teacher of the faith.”¹¹³ More specifically, the Pope asserts that it is in the areas of anthropology and the secularizing of history where Liberation Theology has gone most awry. “Thanks to the Gospel, the Church has the truth about man. This truth is found in an anthropology that the Church never ceases to fathom more thoroughly and to communicate to others. The primordial affirmation of this anthropology is that man is God’s image and cannot be reduced to a mere portion of nature or a nameless element in

¹¹⁰ Ibid, § VI.8.

¹¹¹ Ibid, § III.4.

¹¹² John Paul II, “Address,” § III.2.

¹¹³ Ibid, § I.1.

the human city.”¹¹⁴ John Paul II’s reference to the anthropology that links human beings to God through creation harkens back to the ontology underlying the traditional doctrine of sin: humanity is understood first and foremost as a creature standing in relation to its creator. Over and against the secular humanism that pervaded the time, John Paul II asserts that the foundation for the entirety of the Gospel message and thereby the redeeming power of the Church is this conception of the person as inherently of value in relation to the creator. “In the light of this truth, man is not a being subjected to economic or political processes; these processes are instead directed to man and are subjected to him.”¹¹⁵ As the epitome of creation, humankind cannot be subject to inhuman systems (namely economic, political, or social exploitation or domination). If human beings are subject to inhuman systems, as the analysis of Liberation Theology seems to claim, then the glory of their Creator is thereby diminished. However, as has already been shown, human agency and culpability in systems of domination is central to the revolutionary character of Liberation theology: it is precisely this fact that drives the struggle within human history. Indeed, that human beings are culpable for the ills of the system is a binding up of the notion of sin in a way neglected by ways of thinking that see sin only in terms of free will.

In a similar vein, the completeness of sin and the subsequent totality of Christ’s saving power is another point of contention from the perspective of the Magisterium. According to Benedict XVI, the mistake of a hermeneutic of liberation is “not in bringing attention to a political dimension of the readings of Scripture, but in making this one

¹¹⁴ Ibid, § I.9.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

dimension the principal or exclusive component.”¹¹⁶ According to John Paul II, this error especially applies in the figure of Christ: “In some cases either Christ’s divinity is passed over in silence, or some people in fact fall into forms of interpretation at variance with the Church’s faith. Christ is said to be merely a ‘prophet’, one who proclaimed God’s Kingdom and love, but not the true Son of God, and therefore not the center and object of the very Gospel message.”¹¹⁷ The claim of reductionism in Liberation Theology, however, can be seen as patently false if one take note of either (a) the different levels of analysis and signification given in Liberation Theology, (b) the centrality of the notion of sin as the impetus for a total liberation, or (c) the unity of God and humanity through Christ’s advent, ministry, and atoning sacrifice in human history. The claims of reductionism made from within the Magisterium reflect a reading of Liberation Theology that neglects these three key features.

Perhaps the most vociferous criticisms of Benedict XVI’s “Instruction,” however, are aimed at what he calls “Concepts uncritically borrowed from Marxist ideology.”¹¹⁸ The equation of Marxism with communism by Roman Catholic Church had, at this time, soured many church leaders who saw the totalitarian regimes of Russia, China, North

¹¹⁶ Benedict XVI, § X.5. Earlier in the “Instruction,” he writes that “To some it even seems that the necessary struggle for human justice and freedom in the economic and political sense constitutes the whole essence of salvation. For them, the Gospel is reduced to a purely earthly gospel” (§ VI.4).

¹¹⁷ John Paul II, § I.4. In section X.7 of the “Instruction,” Benedict XVI echoes John Paul II’s Christological critique: “In giving such priority to the political dimension, one is led to deny the ‘radical newness’ of the New Testament and above all to misunderstand the person of Our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, and thus the specific character of the salvation he gave us, that is above all liberation from sin, which is the source of all evils.” Though he is not specific here, the “character of salvation” Benedict XVI refers to here can be understood in light of the traditional definition of sin as the restoration of the individual (at the essential level) to a right relation with God.

¹¹⁸ Benedict XVI, § VI.10.

Korea and others as unjust.¹¹⁹ In addition to these practical concerns, though, the Magisterium also took issue in theory with Marxist ideas. According to Benedict XVI (and drawing upon the commentary of Pope Paul VI), Marxism is a system of thought that presupposes ideological and deterministic structures of class (§ VII.6), tends towards totalitarianism (§ VII.7), denies the liberty and rights of human persons, whose subjectivity is co-opted by the forces of class and history (§ VII.8-9), denies the existence of the human soul (§ VII.10), and generally undermines Christian anthropology, thereby undermining the notions of sin and salvation. Furthermore, Gutierrez's claim of the inherent conflict in the historical moment of Latin America and the theoretically permanent presence of class struggle under this Marxist view of history is seen by Benedict XVI as antithetical to the Church's gospel of reconciliation and peace through Christ: "Class struggle thus understood divides the Church herself, and that in light of this struggle even ecclesial realities must be judged."¹²⁰ In this way it seems that all analysis that shares elements with Marxism is, in the eyes of the Magisterium, "fruit of the poisoned tree." This, however, is a gross oversimplification of the application of Marxist tendencies in the Theology of Liberation: to condemn the entire process of analysis of economic and political injustice simply because it has Marxist proclivities is intellectually unwarranted. Furthermore, the fact that the hegemonic structure of the Church may be subject to critique could be a motivating factor behind this line of criticism. This is precisely the point that John Paul II and Benedict XVI come to defend in addressing the role of the Magisterium.

¹¹⁹ Gutierrez was acutely aware of the association of liberation with communism, and explicitly enjoins proponents of the process of liberation not to back down in the face accusations of being communists (see *Teología* 111).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, § XI.2.

2. The Power and Place of the Magisterium

*“You are teachers of the Truth, and you are expected to proclaim unceasingly, but with special vigor at this moment, the truth concerning the mission of the Church, object of the Creed that we profess, and an indispensable and fundamental area for our fidelity.”*¹²¹

The fact that the CELAM was so thoroughly infiltrated by the Theology of Liberation caused a great deal of worry in Rome, so much so that many of the leaders of the Liberation Theology movement were openly rebuked by the Vatican for their so-called ‘false teachings.’¹²² John Paul II’s emphasis upon doctrinal purity relates directly to his idea that “We are born of the Church. She communicates to us the riches of life and grace entrusted to her. She generates us by baptism, feeds us with the sacraments and the word of God, prepares us for mission, leads us to God's plan, the reason for our existence as Christians.”¹²³ The Pope saw the theology of Liberation, at the level of content, as a betrayal of the traditional interpretations of the Christian Gospel (as was seen in the previous section): yet at a more practical level, he also saw the dangerous implications for the power of the Church emerging in the praxis of Liberation: “In some cases an attitude of mistrust is produced with regard to the “institutional” or “official” Church, which is considered as alienating, as opposed to another Church of the people, one “springing from the people” and taking concrete form in the poor... if the Gospel that we proclaim is seen to be rent by doctrinal disputes...how can those to whom we address our preaching fail to be disturbed, disoriented, even scandalized?”¹²⁴ On the one hand, John

¹²¹ John Paul II, “Address,” § I.6.

¹²² See Hebblethwaite, 210-2, 226-7 for description of actions taken against bishops who professed the Theology of Liberation.

¹²³ John Paul II, “Address,” § I.6.

¹²⁴ Ibid, § I.8. In section I.7, the Pope asks “How could there be authentic evangelizing, if there were no ready and sincere reverence for the sacred Magisterium, in clear awareness that by submitting to it the

Paul II is rightly worried about doctrinal schism over the differing emphases of the practitioners of Liberation Theology; on the other hand, his view displays a thundering deafness to the criticisms of Eurocentricity embedded in Latin American theologians' work. That the Holy See could be considered part of the hegemony of the world system is utterly incomprehensible to the Pope, who, in spite of the redefinition and rededication of the Church to serve the needs of the poor at Vatican II (implying that it had *not* been adequately fulfilling this duty), affirms the infallibility of the tradition over and against the transmodern critique of Liberation thinkers. Benedict XVI likewise points out that "The partisan conception of truth [in Liberation Theology]...corroborates this position. Theologians who do not share the theses of the 'theology of liberation', the hierarchy, and especially the Roman Magisterium are thus discredited in advance as belonging to the class of oppressors. Their theology is a theology of class."¹²⁵ Here, Benedict is critiquing the logical conclusion of the preferential "option for the poor" in Liberation Theology. Again, however, he seems quick to accuse Liberation thinkers of exclusivity without necessarily pausing to question whether or not the criticism from the periphery is accurate.

John Paul II goes on to say, "At the level of content, one must see what is their fidelity to the word of God, to the Church's living Tradition and to her Magisterium."¹²⁶ The system of verification John Paul II would have the Church's leaders utilize appeals

People of God are not accepting the word of men but the true word of God?" He goes on to quote his first pontifical address, *Urbi et Orbi*, saying "The 'objective' importance of this Magisterium must always be kept in mind and also safeguarded, because of the attacks being leveled nowadays in various quarters against some certain truths of the Catholic faith."

¹²⁵ Benedict XVI, § X.1.

¹²⁶ John Paul II, "Address," § III.6.

first to doctrine, then to the authority of the offices of the Vatican, then to the councils of bishops, and so on down the line, finally arriving at the lived experience of the people; this uncritical approach is precisely what Liberation Theology reverses in its ground-up analysis of sin and reconciliation. In his “Instruction,” Benedict XVI walks back a bit from the heavy-handed claim of John Paul II, writing that “One of the conditions for necessary theological correction is giving proper value to the ‘social meaning of the Church’. This teaching is by no means closed... In this perspective, the contributions of theologians and other thinkers in all parts of the world to the reflection of Church is indispensable today.”¹²⁷ However, he also cautions that “pastors must look after the quality and content of catechesis and formation which should always present the ‘whole message of salvation’ and the imperatives of true liberation within the framework of this whole message.”¹²⁸ Once again, the centrality of doctrinal catechesis is emphasized, one that is in keeping with what Benedict XVI calls “the whole message of salvation” (namely the Gospel of the Catholic Church).

3. Orthodoxy vs. Orthopraxy: “First the Bread, then the Word”

In his view of Liberation Theology, Benedict XVI sees the subsumption of “the whole message of salvation” to the historical processes of liberation (economic, political, pedagogical, etc.) as a radical “secularization of the Kingdom of God”¹²⁹ and a relativization of the “truth” of the Church to the interests of classes. As was seen in the

¹²⁷ Benedict XVI, § XI.12.

¹²⁸ Ibid, § XI.16.

¹²⁹ Ibid, § X.6.

previous section, that the Magisterium could be associated with the class of oppressors was a central point of critique of Theology of Liberation and source of queasiness for both John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Beyond personal or political motivations, however, the critique rests on the distinction between “orthodoxy” and the “orthopraxy” emphasized in liberatory analysis:

‘orthodoxy’ or the right rule of faith, is substituted by the notion of “orthopraxy” as the criterion of the truth. In this connection it is important not to confuse practical orientation...with the recognized and privileged priority given to a certain type of “praxis.” For them, this praxis is the revolutionary “praxis” which thus becomes the supreme criterion for theological truth. A healthy theological method no doubt will always take the “praxis” of the Church into account and will find there one of its foundations, but that is because that praxis comes from the faith and is a lived expression of it.¹³⁰

Such participation in a ‘classist,’ ‘revolutionary’ praxis is not only dangerous for the Church: it is counter to the mission of the church as expressed by John Paul II in his address at Puebla. He asserts that “Evangelization in the present and future of Latin America cannot cease to affirm the Church’s faith: Jesus Christ, the Word and the Son of God, becomes man in order to come close to man and to offer him, through the power of his mystery, salvation, the great gift of God.”¹³¹ The Gospel of Christ (as it is professed by the Church) eschews disunity in favor of unity; it affirms a mysterious and personal salvation; it is oriented towards the glorification of God through the restoration of

¹³⁰ Ibid, § X.3.

¹³¹ John Paul II, “Address,” § I.5.

Creation. The Pope's tone in this section of the address is vehement: the revolutionary character of liberation, with its talk of overthrowing systems and the struggle that characterizes history as a manifestation of the Gospel, is at odds with the theology of a God whose omnipotence and mercy (expressed in the mystery of Christ) are the hope and assurance for the salvation of every person. He concludes, "From this faith in Christ, from the bosom of the Church, we are able to serve men and women, our peoples, and to penetrate their culture with the Gospel, to transform hearts, and to make systems and structures more human."¹³² The vision of John Paul II for the church is to infuse the culture of Latin America with the hope of the Gospel, but in a way that addresses the individual ("transforming hearts"). What exactly he means by "make systems and structures more human," however, is unclear: given the critique of Liberation Theology for putting too much stock in so-called "impersonal structures" and the reality that systems of domination are carried out and expressed in the lives of human persons, this comment in particular calls into question whether or not the Pope affirms the necessity for structural overhaul (i.e. revolution). On the other hand, Gutierrez affirms that "En América Latina, la iglesia debe situarse en un continente en proceso revolucionario, en donde la violencia está presente de diferentes maneras. *Su misión* práctica y teóricamente, pastoral y teológicamente se define frente a él. Es decir, más por el hecho político contextual que por problemas intraclesiásticos."¹³³ For Gutierrez, the whole mission of the Church in Latin America is oriented towards the revolutionary praxis already present

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Gutierrez, *Teología*, 180. "In Latin America, the church should see itself situated on a continent in the process of revolution, in which violence is present in different forms. Its practical, theoretical, pastoral and theological mission must be defined in response to that fact. That is to say, it must be defined more in terms of the political work in its context than by intraecclesiastical problems."

in and around it, at work in the world and against the systems of domination that the Church itself is historically associated with.

4. Summary

The case against Liberation Theology from within the Magisterium is largely oriented towards the questions of orthodoxy: that is, maintaining the ideological integrity of the Church. Such critiques seem to ring hollow from the Latin American liberatory perspective, which is historically, geographically, and culturally situated in such a way that it must confront the hegemonic effects of coloniality (wherever they may manifest). Furthermore, the arguments for reductionism in the Theology of Liberation also do not reflect the levels of signification of the notion of ‘Liberation’ nor the centrality of the totalizing category of ‘sin.’ The process of salvation described by the Holy See is instead limited to the salvation of the individual relative to their soul, and only secondarily has implications for the community of faith. In this sense, ‘sin’ and ‘salvation’ are properly religious categories. ‘Sin’ (understood in the sense of this essay) and ‘liberation,’ on the other hand, are categories that are effective at the level of the individual *and* the community, and that have implications in the praxis of human beings. In this way they are properly categories of *ethics*, and not just religion.

B. Criticism of the Principles of Liberation

There are, however, moments within the Magisterium’s critique that do in fact raise troubling questions for the Theology of Liberation. The first of these is the ongoing structural violence that appears to be inherent in human history. True, the “sin of the

world” is pervasive and thoroughgoing, yet within the literature of Liberation Theology it is firmly asserted that the Kingdom of God, in which the poor are liberated from the domination of the system, is “in our midst.” The question of what is meant by the “utopian” character of the Kingdom of Heaven, then, remains live. Furthermore, whether or not the preferential option for the poor is a proper basis for a praxis of liberation in community remains an issue: is the absolute imperative to “Liberate the poor” an ethical maxim, or does it, as Benedict XVI claims, reinforce conflict that is uncharacteristic and even antithetical to the Reign of God?

Secondly, because the principle ‘Liberate the Poor’ is derived from the idea that “the poor are the victims of sin,” a rethinking of the principle would imply a rethinking of what constitutes a ‘sin’ and a ‘sinner.’ Thinking about sin in terms of community first and foremost, as opposed to the individual, may be one way to reconstitute the notion of liberation to more effectively achieve the ethical goals of a praxis of liberation.

1. The Preferential Option for the Poor

As has been seen in both the literature of the Theology of Liberation and the words of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the evangelical mission of the Body of Christ (the Church) is to free human beings from lives of slavery and oppression. The oppression is totalizing, in that it inhibits an individual’s subjectivity and God-given capacity for agency and teleological fulfillment. Every person is understood to have a place in the order of Creation, but that place is determined not just by the relative rightness or wrongness of their free-willing: factors beyond their control impose limitations upon their ability to will freely; their ability to flourish is impeded from

without by political, economic, and social pressures, all of which are the product of the collectivization of human agency. When many persons combine their personal energies to instantiate a course of action that transcends each individual (but nonetheless requires their participation), over time and space such action crystallizes into systems and structures that operate at a level beyond the individual, yet still within the world. As is often the case, however, the exclusion of others during the development of these structures, whether because of geographical or temporal distance from the site of their formation, can lead to moments of conflict at the periphery of the world-economic system. Herein lays the rub: how can one *include* an Other in one's system, with all of its prefabricated constraints and demands, without *imposing* it? That is, how, in generating a new sense of community, can one avoid the pitfall of instantiating something akin to the "coloniality of Being" present in the history of Latin America?

This is the trouble with the idea of the "Kingdom of God." As the name denotes, it is an authoritarian concept: the Kingdom of God has a king, an imposed political order, and a geographical and chronological realm. In the traditional sense of the term, the Kingdom is utterly transcendent; it exists outside of humanity's lived experience and is the sight from which God enjoys the glory of the Creation. In the sense given it by Theology of Liberation, the Kingdom is a utopia, present *in potentia* in human experience; it is an organization of humankind in which genuine person-to-person communication is possible, in which the rich are poor and the poor are rich. The Kingdom is future-oriented: it is always outside of history. Just as the apostles waited eagerly for the Parousia that they expected within a generation, so too does the Kingdom of God lurk on the temporal and geopolitical periphery of human experience, obscured by

the injustice of the present world. Just as the sin of the dominator is masked by the ideology of the system, so too is the hope of the victim covered over.

What then, does it mean to take on the “perspective of the poor”? Is not this perspective equally clouded by the present system? And does not the cause of liberation imply an assertion of the Reign of God, the hegemony of the so-called righteous? Dussel’s exhortation to continuously be on the lookout for the poor seems to imply that liberation is not a singular teleological progression in history, but an ongoing cycle in which the poor revolt against the sinfulness of the system (and those who enact it), then become the dominators themselves. Furthermore, this cycle has no geographical or chronological rhyme or reason to it: it is not a unilateral Hegelian movement of history, nor is it the epiphany of Kingdom of Heaven once and for all through the Parousia. Instead, it is driven by the conflict at the periphery of the Reign of the Prince of This World, even as the position of that dominion continues to move. Pinpointing the perspective of the poor is thus risky at best and impossible at worst.

Is the maxim to “Liberate the Poor” misleading? It is at least confusing by virtue of its presuppositions of conflict and identity, its utopianism, and its cyclical character. If the process of liberation promised in the Gospel is to be achieved, a better understanding of how one comes to be both sinner and victim needs to be achieved.

2. Another Perspective

The preferential option for the poor falls prey to the ideological tendencies it seeks to overcome: in this way it reinstitutes a closed system (a “Kingdom”) over and over. An ethic that tends towards such ongoing conflict does not reflect the hope and

promise of the Gospel (namely a permanent and abiding peace in relation to God). On the other hand, to turn back to the definition of salvation given by the Magisterium is to give up the possibility of a truly total liberation that (a) transcends the religious and addresses the whole being of a person, (b) brings about a community of genuine fellowship and justice, and (c) is free of the epistemological and ontological limitations of ideology. In the following section of the essay, I will propose that such a view of liberation can be found in the philosophy of Josiah Royce, and in particular in his discussion of what he calls the “Christian doctrine of Life”¹³⁴ in *The Problem of Christianity*. In this work, Royce presents what I consider to be a superior principle for an ethical building up of community, namely the principle of “Loyalty,” which is oriented towards a unifying principle that binds persons together across time and space, yet which also allows for the unconstrained expression of individual subjectivity. Furthermore, in this work Royce describes the breakdown of community in terms of “betrayal,” which I see as a third way of conceiving of sin to be added to those already analyzed. From this additional analysis, a potentially comprehensive definition of sin will emerge as an ethical category in terms of human praxis and community.

¹³⁴ Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 55.

CHAPTER IV

ROYCE'S PRINCIPLES OF LOYALTY AND COMMUNITY

Originally delivered as the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford in 1913, *The Problem of Christianity* is the quintessential text of the later work of Josiah Royce. Frank Oppenheim, in his foreword to the fifth edition of the text, calls the text “a serious, thorough, and reasonable interpretation” of what Royce took to be “the most essential beliefs of Christianity.”¹³⁵ It is the culmination of years of contending with religious questions and problems, dating back to his first major work (*The Sources of Religious Insight*) and beyond. Oppenheim notes that, as a young man, Royce was “caught between the practical Christian service of his devoted, mystical, and Bible-centered mother and that ‘higher criticism’ of the Bible he encountered as a twenty-year-old in Germany. All these tensions induced in the young Royce a love-hate relationship toward Christianity as he found it.”¹³⁶ Growing up in the frontier home of pious, if not particularly ‘churched’ Christian parents introduced Royce to a Christian faith that could be seen and experienced in everyday life. Yet his intellectual development also brought him to question the metaphysical claims underlying this piety.¹³⁷ What we see in *The Problem of Christianity* is a critical engagement with the core beliefs Royce distilled through a career of engagement with religious questions. These beliefs, summarized in brief, are what

¹³⁵ Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J., Foreword, *The Problem of Christianity*, viii-ix.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹³⁷ For more on Royce’s religious heritage, see John Clendenning, *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1999), 7-10. Clendenning makes special note of the cultural climate engendered around Christian revivalist movements of the 1830s and 40s (such as the Seventh Day Adventists, the rise in popularity of Pentecostalism, and the birth of the Mormon Church, etc.) and argues that the religious practice of Royce’s parents (and particularly his mother) reflected that cultural milieu. With this in mind, it is clear that Royce’s religious upbringing was anything but Roman Catholic, and therefore consonances between his philosophy and that of Liberation Theology seem all the more interesting (and also problematic for the dogmatic Roman Church).

Royce calls “The Christian Doctrine of Life,” that is, his understanding of the notion of salvation through community that forms the basis for truly *Christian* living, and “the Principle of Loyalty” that comes about as the ethical implication of this doctrine. In laying out in detail his interpretation of these ideas, Royce provides insights into the ways in which the Kingdom of God is built up here and now as human community in spite of the sins of the world.

A. Loyalty and Community

As in the Theology of Liberation, the departure for Royce’s analysis of Christian living begins in the vagueness of the ethical core of the New Testament: the Sermon on the Mount.

The Master freely speaks of what he calls the Kingdom of Heaven. And the Kingdom of Heaven appears, on its very face, to be some sort of social order, some sort of collective life, some kind of community. Yet the reported sayings do not, when taken by themselves, make perfectly explicit what that social order, what that community, is to which the name Kingdom of Heaven is intended to apply.¹³⁸

The conclusion Royce derives from this observation, however, is not nearly as specific as that of the Liberation Theologian: instead, he rather conservatively proposes that “There is a certain universal and divine spiritual community. Membership in that community is necessary to the salvation of man.”¹³⁹ The essential feature of this divine community is its oneness, its capacity to act as a singular unit over and above the individual member.

¹³⁸ Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 71.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

The community is a “real unity” of disparate persons, and as such “the individual member...may be devoted to it as if it were his friend or father, may serve it, may live and die for it.”¹⁴⁰ This devotion, found not only in Christian communities but everywhere where two and three are gathered in a “cause which unites many selves in one,”¹⁴¹ Royce calls “Loyalty:” “For a loyal human being the interest of the community to which he belongs is superior to every merely individual interest of his own. He actively devotes himself to this cause...To the individual the loyal spirit appeals by fixing his attention upon a life incomparably vaster than his own individual life.”¹⁴² Royce asserts that the natural state of the human being is in conflict with his or her neighbor: “This curse is rooted in the primal constitution which makes man social, and which adapts him to win his intelligence through social conflicts with his neighbors.”¹⁴³ Human communities are brought together by the desires and intentions of individual human beings towards an ideal that cannot be expressed or achieved in their singular existence: it is bigger than each of them individually. The ideal is situated historically and culturally: it arises out of the shared experience of many individuals in a specific time and place. Furthermore, loyalty can be recognized in the life of those united in distinct communities formed around different ideals: Royce explains, “On a more highly self-conscious level the loyal spirit tends to assume the form of chivalry. The really devoted and considerate warrior learns to admire the loyalty of his foe; yes, even to depend upon it for some of his own best inspiration...Kindred clans learn to respect and, ere long, to share one another’s

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 82-3.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 83.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 127.

loyalty... The loyal are, in ideal, essentially kin.”¹⁴⁴ The level of the “ideal community,” the level at which loyalty itself is the ultimate principle, encompasses all of humankind for Royce: it is not some theoretical extension of the principle, but the real ideal he perceives in the Pauline interpretation of the injunction to “Love thy neighbor.” In Paul’s thought, Royce sees the Christian doctrine of love joined with the practical principle of loyalty: “Both the neighbor and the lover of the neighbor to whom the Apostle appeals are, to his mind, members of the body of Christ; and all the value of each man as an individual is bound up with his membership in this body, and with his love for the community.”¹⁴⁵ This assertion prompts the next driving question of Royce’s project: “What is the nature and the worth of the individual man?”¹⁴⁶ The worth of the individual, according to Royce, is in their loyalty: “Loyalty of the type that is in question when our salvation, in Paul’s sense of salvation, is to be won, is the loyalty which springs up *after* the individual self-will has been trained.”¹⁴⁷ True loyalty, and not mere tribalism or provincialism, is manifested as an act of the will: it is the active claim that “I am loyal to this cause not because of familiarity or acculturation, but because it is an object of my love.” Royce goes on to explain that “In order to be thus lovable to the critical and naturally rebellious soul, the Beloved Community must be quite unlike a natural social group... This community must be an union of members who first love it. The unity of love must pervade it, before the individual member can find it lovable.”¹⁴⁸ This pervasive

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 84.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 95.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 72.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 128.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 129.

character of love is “some miracle of grace (as it would seem) [that] can initiate the new life, either in the individuals who are to love their communities, or in the communities that are to be worthy of their love.”¹⁴⁹

As in the Theology of Liberation, Royce puts heavy emphasis upon the historicity of the formation of the community and the active loyalty of its members. Communities function in the world: they are not Kingdoms of Heaven outside of time, but possess a past, present, and future identity. Royce calls communities in which the members identify with one another on the basis of the same experience of some past event “communities of memory,” and ones where the members share an expectation of the same future event “communities of hope”:

A community, whether of memory or of hope, exists relatively to the past or future facts to which its several members stand in the common relation just defined. The concept of community depends upon the interpretation which each individual member gives to his own self,—to his own past—,and to his own future...How rich this community is in meaning, in value, in membership, in significant organization, will depend upon the selves that enter into the community, and upon the ideals in terms of which they define themselves, their past, and their future.¹⁵⁰

Unlike in the Theology of Liberation, where the richness of the community is defined in terms of a singular existential ideal (the person-to-person relationships), the Beloved Community Royce describes is characterized by the historical content imbued in it by its members. In this way, Royce leaves more theoretical room for the identity of the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 130.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 248-9.

community to be expressed, rather than putting it purely in terms of domination and conflict. Furthermore, this also allows for the possibility of communities which possess differing, though non-competing ideals. Such a view is more conducive to the more peaceful and less revolutionary interpretations of the Christian scripture.

The ideal community, however, remains a somewhat vacuous concept for Royce: “The universal and beloved community is still hidden from our imperfect human view, and will remain so, how long we know not.”¹⁵¹ Royce’s emphasis on fallibilism when it comes to the specific ideals which will characterize the ideal human community can be viewed as a problematic lack of direction for ethical praxis; on the other hand, it can also be seen as both a recognition of the human condition and an opportunity for creative and novel human activity: “The principle of principles in all Christian morals remains this:— ‘Since you cannot *find* the universal and beloved community—create it.’ And this again, applied to the concrete art of living, means: Do whatever you can to take a step towards it, or to assist anybody...to take steps towards the organization of that coming community.”¹⁵² Instead of asserting an ethical principle that presupposes states of being that define and condition how and why individual human beings can act, Royce leaves the door open to each individual to ascertain the best way forward toward the Beloved Community; in this way, he avoids the pitfalls of lending the principle of loyalty to any one specific nation, class, and Church. Instead, all of these must seek to broaden their perspective to that of the Universal Community. “See, then, in every man the branch of such a vine,—the outflowing of such a purpose,—the beloved of such a spirit, the incarnation of such a divine concern for many in one. And then your Christian love will

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 200.

¹⁵² Ibid.

be much more than amiable pity...For its object is the Beloved Community, and the individual as, ideally, a member of that community.”¹⁵³

B. Betrayal and Atonement

Where, in Royce’s system, does sin come into play? The principle of Loyalty is indeed lofty enough to impose a strict ethical standard upon a person: it is characterized by the necessity for reasoned perception of one’s world and one’s fellow human being, as well as the fortitude of spirit to act in the interests of something grander than oneself. Theorizing from his own experience, Royce avers that “Whoever, through grace, has found the beloved of his life, and now freely lives the life of love, knows that he could, if chose, betray the beloved. And he knows what estimate his own free choice now requires him to put upon such betrayal.”¹⁵⁴ With the freedom to love likewise comes the freedom to betray: it is a fact which Royce calls each person to judge from their experience to be true. He only goes so far as to say that “The common experience of mankind *seems* to show that such actual and deliberate sin against the light, such conscious and willful treason, occasionally takes place.”¹⁵⁵ As in the traditional definition of sin, the effects of this willful betrayal are immediately evident to the sinner: “That fact, that event, that deed, is irrevocable. The fact that I am the one who then did thus and so, not ignorantly, but knowingly,—that fact will outlast the ages. That fact is as endless as time.”¹⁵⁶ Whether for good or ill, the key effect of such a betrayal is its endurance, its permanence;

¹⁵³ Ibid, 197.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 158.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 159.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 160.

it is a part of the history of the individual that cannot be gone back upon. In the voice of the sinner, Royce asserts that “I can do good deeds in future; but I cannot revoke my individual past deed...Nothing that I myself can do will ever really reconcile me to my own deed, so far as it was that treason.”¹⁵⁷The corruption of self that this occasions is only in terms of his or her Loyalty, and the perpetuation of that loyalty.

In this way, however, the effect of the sin transcends the individual’s experience. For as it was a violation of the principle to which he or she was loyal, a principle shared in community, the community is likewise affected by the betrayal.

What human ties the traitor broke, we leave to him to discover for himself. Why they were to his mind holy, we also need not now inquire...He destroyed by his deed the community in whose brotherhood, in whose life, in whose spirit, he had found his guide and his ideal. His deed, then, concerns not himself only, but that community whereof he was a voluntary member.¹⁵⁸

The discovery of the traitor’s sin is evident in the breakdown of the community, whether that be catastrophic or relatively minor. Either way, the act of treason, the sin of the individual, calls into question how the community can persevere as a unity while “[reconciling] itself to the existence of traitors in its world, and to the deed of individual traitors.”¹⁵⁹ Just as the sin of the individual is an irrevocable and everlasting feature of the individual’s history, so too does the betrayal of the community become a fact of its history and a potential impediment to its persistence in the future. The facticity of the deed means that there can be no “forgiveness” according to Royce: instead, there can

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 163.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 174-5.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 175.

only be “atonement”: “This triumph over treason can only be accomplished by the community, or on behalf of the community, through some steadfastly loyal servant who acts, so to speak, as the incarnation of the very spirit of the community itself. . . . *The world, as transformed by this creative deed, is better than it would have been had all else remained the same, but had that deed of treason not been done at all.*”¹⁶⁰ The atonement of the community (and not the sinner) is what propels the community into a new creation, one that both required and overcame the act of betrayal which sundered the unity of the community in the first place. Simply “repairing” the disunity of the community is impossible due to the facticity of human activity; however, surmounting the negative act through a new creation is what gives the community a newly conceived ideal or purpose towards which to strive. In this sense, the possibility for reconciliation of the traitor comes through the adoption of this new ideal, even as the previous order is left behind.

This sort of action is precisely what is meant by “analectic” activity in history: the surpassing of present systems bogged down by the sinful acts of its members. Atonement is utopian, yet only in terms of the past system. Indeed, in the present, loyalty always pursues an end in view, and thanks to the courageous sacrifice of the community and/or its representatives, a new end is put forth to reorient its members towards a new hope.

This system does not expiate the sinner of his or her sin; it instead provides the opportunity for redemption in his or her life, the chance to reorient the self in terms of a universal telos, and also to hold in memory the facticity of his or her betrayal. Past, present, and future all come together in the moment of atonement and the recommitment to the principle of loyalty. At the same time, unlike Liberation Theology, the categories of domination (‘sinner’ and ‘poor’) are not imposed upon experience: rather, the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 180.

judgment of sin is in terms of the sinner's perception of his or her own loyalty, and in terms of the unity or disunity of the community. The Gospel message to be reconciled to one's neighbor demands loyalty to the principles which bind one to the other, and not merely the recognition of personhood and the provision of material charity (i.e. "feeding the poor").

C. Summary

In the Theology of Liberation, the effects of sin are located in the body of the Other, in the victim of systems of oppression that transcend the individual, yet that nonetheless are constituted by the sins of individual persons. In Royce's depiction of the Beloved Community, the sinful betrayal of the community is always the act of one of its members, but has effects upon the experience of both the sinner and at the transcendent level of the community. The loyalty required of the individual is a somewhat miraculous upwelling of the spirit towards a principle that extends far beyond the reach of one person: when it comes to be shared by others, whether through common experience or common expectation, a community is generated which calls upon its members to prefer the sanctity of their shared ideal. At the broadest level, the Beloved Community encompasses all human life, and in turn imbues each of its members with the fullness of the experience of the universal. Unlike the Theology of Liberation, where the historicity of liberation is oriented towards geopolitical conflict put in terms of the poor and the oppressor, the Beloved Community is an absolute ideal and telos that eschews the conflict of this world. Its achievement, however, is fleeting: Royce recognizes and cautions his audience to attend to human fallibilism and the radical freedom that allows

humanity to will both loyalty and betrayal. In this sense, the epistemic demands of the Beloved Community far outpace those of the Theology of Liberation, wherein the principle “Liberate the Poor” is seen as an absolute maxim for human praxis. Royce instead proposes the ethic of loyalty, that is, the continuous extension of the whole of one’s intentions beyond oneself to a principle that transcends any individualistic purpose.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

A. Royce and Liberation Theology

Josiah Royce's interpretation of Christian ethics of community is a theoretically stimulating articulation of an absolute ethic that emerges from and as a response to lived experience. The ideals that human beings are called to be loyal to are as diverse as the experiences and cultures of the people themselves: yet across this plurality, the overarching principle of Loyalty to the community (and its reciprocal engendering of loyalty and love) points to the kind of ethic that can bring about a Beloved Community able to withstand the betrayal and sin of its members against it and endure.

Royce is hard-pressed, however, to give any clear, historical example of such a community. This does not seem to be his intention in *The Problem of Christianity*: instead, he is explicating the theoretical and epistemic structures that support the everyday praxis of people-in-the-world. In this way, Royce's analysis functions best as a philosophical lens through which to analyze historical movements, such as that of Liberation Theology. A Roycean may ask of the Theology of Liberation, "Is there an ideal here that orients a community? Is there a call to loyalty? Does the community engender loyalty?" On the other hand, the Liberation Theologian may ask of Royce, "What is the history that informs your ethics? Who are the people in your Beloved Community? Who is excluded?" There is a fundamental difference methodologically evident between Liberation Theology and Royce's philosophical analysis of Christian

ethics, yet it seems to me that this only provides for a richer synthesis when the two are thought together.

The history of colonialism and colonality in Latin America is what gives life to the commentary of the Theology of Liberation: the suffering of indigenous populations under the conquistadores, the pervasive racism and classism that continues to keep people on the brink of death (and push many over it), the degraded workers, and those who are forever disabled by the traumas of war and violence, when they are seen clearly behind the ideological obfuscations of the global Center, reveal the depth of the sin of the world and its effects. Theologians who see the face of the other cannot help but turn their gazes from on high to the person before them, yet in that person-to-person relation a higher ideal is born, an ideal that inspires and demands their loyalty. If the wages of sin are death, both for the other and for the sinner, than the reward for service to the life of the poor, their salvation, is the gift of the Beloved Community. On the ground, in Latin America, the Beloved Community is everywhere where the theology of liberation becomes a praxis of liberation: it is what calls the Church of Latin America to be unique, devoted to the ideal called forth from the experience of Latin@s.

On the flipside, however, Royce's philosophy of loyalty could be thought to reinforce the rule of the system, the loyalty of those in power. This would be an interpretation of the world community as a "community of memory," one that reflects the history of conquest and seeks to nostalgically maintain it. Yet the apocalyptic vision of Christian hope, expressed in the words of Jesus in the Gospels, by St. Paul in his letters, and in the Revelation, must be the more fitting way to understand the Christian Church: i.e., as a "community of *hope*." Any loyalty to a past of oppression and violence would

only engender more violence: yet loyalty to the hope of a peaceful, just, and equitable world where the first are last and the last first is an ideal that orients history toward the good news of the Gospel.

Over and against this emphasis on the future, however, I think that Dussel in particular would argue that the memory of the poor, the experience of the indigenous who suffered in slavery under the conquistadores, for instance, is a vital to the revolt against the system. To ignore the past for the sake of some future glory would be the kind of naïve utopianism that Dussel sees as misleading. In this way, the Christian community working towards liberation would have to be in some sense a community of memory; yet it would not be a community of memory in the sense that the Magisterium would see as necessary: that is to say, the Church would not be bound up in static practices and doctrines simply for the sake of tradition and dogma. Only by seeing the history of the Church in terms of its future glory as the just and equitable Reign of God can there be enough freedom from the system to build up the Beloved Community.

B. What Kind of Ethics Should We Hope For?

This study endeavored to examine what significance the theological concept of sin has when it comes to ethics beyond the realm of the religious piety. What became evident was that the language of sin gives philosophers and ethicists a way of talking about the effects of human agency in experience that goes beyond cultural, political, legal, or conventional modes of right and wrong. Putting oppression and suffering in terms of sin makes clear the ontological and existential effects that the conflicts and conquests of human history have wrought. It raises the level of discourse to that of a

transcendental, absolute norm wherein the present system can be confronted, judged, and responded to at the level of structures of power, as well as the individual person's actions. In the case of the theological analysis, we saw categories of judgment emerge from scripture (*Amistad*, love for one's neighbor); through the historical methodology of Liberation thinkers, we saw that it was the revelation of the face of suffering that prompted an orientation toward life and away from death; finally, out of Royce's analysis we culled the means to judge how well those standards are adhered to, providing a criterion for ethical implementation and operation of absolute norms in the context of human history. From this methodological synthesis born on the border of philosophy and theology, I believe that the notions of sin and reconciliation examined here provide for deeper, more thoroughgoing grounds for ethical exhortation and adjudication. This is, after all, what Royce tells us is the historical *telos* of all philosophical endeavors: "to bring to pass, or to move towards, the salvation of man."

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